On The Concept of Religion in Walter Benjamin's Critical Theory

Lee Christian Kuhnle

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Graduate Program in Social and Political Thought
York University
Toronto, Ontario

December 2012

Abstract

In this dissertation I explore the concept of religion in the philosophy that underlies Walter Benjamin's critical theory. This analysis leads me to suggest two related conclusions: 1) contrary to secularist discourses, Benjamin regards the modern social as being religiously constituted and, 2) Benjamin develops a philosophy of experience, a "phenomenology," in which the religious is an inalienable aspect of experience itself. In developing these two arguments, I challenge the assumption of much of the secondary literature on Benjamin, which maintains that while the religious characterizes aspects of his early works, it is replaced by a Marxian-materialist paradigm in his later writings. Contrary to this gloss, I suggest that Benjamin's writings represent an attempt to *synthesize* a religious and a Marxian-materialist paradigm.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

I – Benjamin's Religious Marxism?

Walter Benjamin's philosophy and social criticism can be read as challenging a basic assumption ostensibly embedded within the onto-epistemology of historical materialism, namely, that the religious is a fundamentally illusory representation of real objective conditions, that it is essentially "false consciousness." Although Benjamin emphasizes the Marxian dimension in his cultural analysis, especially in his later works, he nonetheless seems to disrupt the underlying logic upon which historical materialism is predicated, when he introduces concepts, motifs and themes derived from both biblical and pagan religious traditions.[1] Benjamin's reliance on religious language to articulate a critical theory of culture is more than a rhetorical strategy, more than simple metaphor. Instead, Benjamin's philosophy, whatever else we might deem it to be, also represents an attempt to merge elements of a Marxian materialism with a religious imaginary. According to Irving Wohlfarth, "Benjamin's attempt to recast theology into historical

---

[1] See, Eric Jacobson, *Metaphysics of the Profane: The Political Theology of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem* (New York: Columbia University, 2003). Jacobson convincingly argues that Benjamin's early work is more closely associated with the Anarchist rather than the Marxian tradition. However, for the purposes of the present study, historical materialism, defined as the philosophical underpinnings of Marxism, expresses more clearly the underlying tensions with the religious. This tension also exists in the most Anarchist traditions, which, like Marxism, tend to be based upon a materialist philosophy. See, for example, Mikhail Aleksandrovich Bakunin, *God and the State* (New York: Mother Earth Publications 1880). Since there is no great distinction between the underlying logic that accounts for the hostility towards the religious within both the Marxian and Anarchist traditions, historical materialism is used as a convenient abridgment of all left-wing radical philosophico-political positions informed by a rigorous materialism. That is, even though the following discussion is couched almost exclusively in the language of Marxism, I maintain that the broad outlines of this argument apply equally well to Anarchism.

materialism was his way of coming to terms with his formative intellectual experiences," and represents "a 'third' way which re-fused the alternative, posed by his competing friends (Brecht, Scholem and, more 'dialectically,' Adorno) [....]"[2] In 1931, Benjamin hints at this attempted merger in a letter to his friend, the editor of the *Neue schweizer Rundschau*, Max Rychner, explicitly referencing *both* a historical materialist and theological method of inquiry, writing:

> Of those [solutions], the one most familiar to me would be to see in me not a representative of dialectical materialism as a dogma, but a scholar to whom the *stance* of the materialist seems scientifically and humanely more productive in everything that moves us than does that of the idealist. If I might express it in brief: I have never been able to do research and think in any sense other than, if you will, a theological one, namely, in accordance with the Talmudic teaching about the forty-nine levels of meaning in every passage of Torah. That is, in my experience, the most trite Communist platitude possesses more *hierarchies of meaning* than does contemporary bourgeois profundity, which has only one meaning, that of an apologetic. (*Correspondences*, 373)

Although Benjamin's writings are marked by the conspicuous coexistence of themes derived from both the religious and historical materialist philosophies, especially evident in the essays "Karl Kraus," and "The Author as Producer," the plea for their

---

[2] Irving Wohlfarth, "Re-Fusing Theology. Some First Responses to Walter Benjamin's Arcades Project," *New German Critique* 39 (1986): 10.

merger is perhaps nowhere more explicitly formulated than in the first aphorism of his "Theses on the Concept of History." Benjamin writes:

> There was once, we know, an automaton constructed in such a way that it could respond to every move by a chess player with a countermove that would ensure the winning of the game. A puppet wearing Turkish attire and with a hookah in its mouth sat before a chessboard placed on a large table. A system of mirrors created the illusion that this table was transparent on all sides. Actually, a hunchbacked dwarf – a master at chess – sat inside and guided the puppet's hand by means of strings. One can imagine a philosophical counterpart to this apparatus. The puppet, called "historical materialism," is to win all the time. It can easily be a match for anyone if it enlists the services of theology, which today, as we know, is small and ugly and has to keep out of sight. (*SW4*, 389; *GS1*, 693)[3]

I take as significant the fact that Benjamin encloses historical materialism in quotation marks. With this punctuation Benjamin is signaling the need to suspend our judgment regarding the content of a *real* historical materialism. In this thought-image, what is

---

[3] *Bekanntlich soll es einen Automaten gegeben haben, der so konstruiert gewesen sei, daß er jede Zug eines Schachspielers mit einem Gegenzug erwidert habe, der ihm den Gewin der Partie sicherte. Eine Puppe in türkischer Tracht, eine Wasserpfeife im Munde, saß vor dem Brett, das auf einem geräumigen Tisch aufruhte. Durch ein System von Spiegeln wurde die Illusion erweckt, dieser Tisch sei von allen Seiten durchsichtig. In Wahrheit saß ein buckliger Zwerg darin, der ein Meister im Schachspiel war und die Hand der Puppe an Schnüren lenkte. Zu dieser Apparatur kann man sich ein Gegenstück in der Philosophie vorstellen. Gewinnen soll immer die Puppe, die man 'historishen Materialismus' nennt. Sie kann es ohne weiteres mit jedem aufnehmen, wenn sie die Theologie in ihren Dienst nimmt, die heute bekanntlich klein und häßlich ist und sich ohnehin nicht darf blicken lassen.*

generally understood under the notion of historical materialism, is the external casing of a tradition that is animated by something else, the theological.

The convergence, or clash, in Benjamin's work of the religious and a certain "historical materialism" expresses in a truncated manner the broader and still open question within Marxian philosophy as to the status of ideology in relation to the real, or, put still more generally, to the role of the "superstructure," or the "ideal," in the real. Benjamin's acquaintance, Karl Korsch, whom he met in 1929 through Berthold Brecht, points the way, when he suggests that, "The key problem to settle here is how in general to approach the relationship of consciousness to its object."[4] The origin of this open question, to which Benjamin's oeuvre could be read as a long meditative answer, can be traced to a degree of ambiguity in Karl Marx's own works in which he vacillates between a definition of ideology as fundamentally illusory on the one hand, and a dialectical definition, more subtle and nuanced, on the other. An example of the former characterization is provided by Louis Althusser who notes that for the Marx of *German Ideology*:

> Ideology is conceived as a pure illusion, a pure dream, i.e., as nothingness. All reality is external to it. Ideology is thus thought as an imaginary construction whose status is exactly like the theoretical status of the dream among writers before Freud. For these writers, the dream was the purely imaginary, i.e., null [....][5]

---

[4] Karl Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, trans. Fred Halliday (New York: Modern Reader, 1970), 83.
[5] Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy: And other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 108.

Althusser continues:

> Ideology, then, is for Marx an imaginary assemblage (*bricolage*), a pure dream, empty and vain, constituted by the 'day's residues' from the only full and positive reality, that of the concrete history of concrete material individuals materially producing their existence.[6]

It has long since become a cliché to reiterate Marx's assertion that he turned G.W.F. Hegel back on his feet, that he replaced the ideal elements of the Hegelian dialectic with the concrete historical. Not Hegel's "world Spirit," but the working class is for Marx the engine of history. Marx formulates this point in the preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, writing that, "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness." The reductive materialism that can be inferred from this and other similar statements, and so succinctly articulated by Althusser above, is already present in the left-Hegelianism of Ludwig Feuerbach, which informs an entire lineage of Marxian thought. Starting perhaps already with Marx and certainly traceable to the works of Friedrich Engels and Eduard Bernstein, this reductive Marxian materialism came into full expression in the theories of the Second Worker's International, and devolved into the philosophical *cul de sac* of Soviet "Diamat." For this

---

[6] Ibid.

lineage of Marxian philosophy, the concrete material dimension circumscribes the horizon of the real. Cultural forms, especially the religious, are thought to represent the less essential moment, a reflection, an epiphenomenon of actual social relations. If, as Marx's criticism of Hegel's idealism suggests, the horizon of the real is coterminous with the horizon of objective material conditions, it could be argued that the super-structural dimensions of human existence, the ideal realm, has a certain concomitant unreality. Of all the dimensions of the ideal realm, perhaps none is regarded by many Marxian materialists as being further removed from representing any real objective relations than the religious. "Communism," Marx states in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, "begins from the outset with atheism [....]"[7] The religious, however, is precisely what Benjamin strives to re-introduce into a Marxian discourse. Seen from the perspective of this reductive materialism, Benjamin seems to violate flagrantly the "rules of the game" when he attempts to perform a materialist social theory couched in the language of biblical metaphysics.

However, Benjamin's project of attempting to supplement historical materialism with concepts derived from the religious, need not necessarily be dismissed out of hand. As suggested above, there is a degree of ambiguity in Marx's texts, some of which, especially his later works, suggest that the ideal moment, if not necessarily the specifically religious, needs to be included as a constitutive part of a properly materialist explanation of the social. Perhaps the most succinct repudiation of what Marx refers to as

---

[7] Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, ed. and trans. Martin Milligan (New York: Dover Publications), 103.

"vulgar," or "mechanical materialism" is found in *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, where he seems to de-emphasize the distinction between a material and ideal realm, writing that "[...] theory also becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses." To that text might be added Marx's "Theses on Feuerbach." All eleven of its aphorisms assert the need to include the ideal moment, often excluded by more reductive materialist philosophies.

These more nuanced reflections by Marx – the above examples of which do not represent an exhaustive list – have given rise to a different type of Marxian philosophy which diverges significantly from the reductive materialism(s) described by Althusser regarding the status of the ideal in the real. Thinkers such as the afore mentioned Korsch, as well as Georg Lukacs and Alfred Sohn-Rethel, are early lights in this lineage which Max Horkheimer later christened critical theory. In what follows, critical theory will serve as an umbrella term for a group of historical materialists whose thoughts are characterized by a different, a more substantive and nuanced approach to the onto-epistemological status of the ideal moment than that of "vulgar" materialism(s). Korsch emphasizes the fault line separating the position of critical theory from a reductive materialist approach, writing, "[...] many vulgar-Marxists to this day have never, even in theory, admitted that intellectual life and forms of social consciousness are comparable realities,"[8] and that, "The major weakness of vulgar socialism is that, in Marxist terms it clings quite unscientifically to a naïve realism [....]"[9]

---

[8] Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, 82.
[9] Ibid., 86.

If critical theory can be thought of as a more or less coherent stream of "western" Marxian thought, in the language of Perry Anderson,[10] one which attempts to supplement the thoughts of Marx with Max Weber and Sigmund Freud, one which is further characterized by its attempt to theorize culture dialectically, one in which the ideal moment is regarded as a semi-independent causal factor, that is, a theory which resists reducing everything to a reflection of the material substratum, then perhaps Moishe Postone can be read as describing its general approach with respect to the ideal moment, to the status of meaning. According to Postone, Marxian theory:

> [...] treats meaning neither in a reductive materialist manner, as an epiphenomenal reflex of a physical material base, nor in an idealist manner, as a self-grounding and completely autonomous sphere. Rather, it seeks to grasp social life with categories that allow it to treat the structure of meaning as an intrinsic movement of the constituted and constituting structure of social relations.[11]

Benjamin makes Postone's point somewhat more succinctly, writing in the *Arcades Project* that, "It is not the economic origins of cultures that will be presented, but the *expression* of the economy in its culture"[12] [N1a,6; emphasis added.]

The reader may be forgiven for wondering why this old debate within Marxian philosophy needs to be rehearsed here, were it not for the fact that the critiques supplied

---

[10]See for example, Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London: New Left Review, 1976).

[11] Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 225.

[12] "*Nicht die wirtschaftliche Entstehung der Kultur sondern der Ausdruck der Wirtschaft in ihrer Kultur ist darzustellen.*"

by the reductive materialists regarding the ideal moment reappear within critical theory with respect to religion. The different philosophical positions separating mechanical Marxian materialisms from the more dialectically inspired critical theories may seem clear enough. However, the lines become somewhat blurry again when the question turns specifically to the religious. Clearly, those more mechanically inclined theorists dismiss the religious, as they tend to dismiss other moments of the ideal. Whereas many critical theorists and western Marxists who are otherwise well-disposed to include the ideal moment in their philosophies, they nonetheless seem all to ready to regress to an almost reactionary, mechanical materialist position when faced with the suggestion that the religious too could provide categories that can elucidate the form of the social.

A little differentiation is clearly called for here. In point of fact, critical theory is *not* one tradition, and with respect to the status of the religious in the theories of the various thinkers that might be deemed to adhere to this "tradition," there are many different approaches. Ernst Bloch, like Benjamin did not accept the dismissal of the religious common within Marxian philosophies. Even Engels, who is often regarded as the grandfather of a certain reductive Marxian materialism, showed an interest in the role of the religious, which went beyond dismissing the phenomenon as merely reactionary.[13] There are many other examples that could be appended here as well. The claim being suggested here then has more the character of a general tendency. On the whole, works by Marxian social theorists, even critical theorists, evince an attitude towards the religious

---

[13] Michael Löwy, "Friedrich Engels on Religion and Class Struggle," *Science and Society* 62, no.1 (Spring 1998): 79.

that can be located somewhere between condescending dismissal and outright hostility. This position is summarized by Michael Löwy when he writes, "The well-known phrase 'religion is the opium of the people' is considered as the quintessence of the Marxist conception of the religious phenomenon by most of its supporters and opponents."[14] I will argue that there are internal logical grounds why this position is philosophically unwarranted as well as historical grounds for the continued intransigence of this stance. The often implicit argument seems to be that even if some aspects of culture such as philosophy, art or science can be repatriated into a dialectical materialist analysis, other aspects are simply too far removed from expressing anything real, making their status really analogous to that of the dream before Freud. However, the underlying logic of the dialectic which legitimates the inclusion of other ideal moments is the same logic that should open the way for the inclusion of the religious as a positive constitutive factor, necessary for a comprehensive analysis of the social. However, even in critical theory, the religious is often viewed negatively, deemed mere false consciousness. I maintain that this repudiation of the religious by the majority of Marxian theorists derives ultimately from the *un*critical acceptance in critical theory of bourgeois social categories. Indeed, I would go so far as to suggest that this resistance to the religious has the character of a defense mechanism. Arguments often marshaled in support of secularism seem to have the status of a symptom, gesturing to a cultural repression, necessary for the upkeep of a certain bourgeois self-identity.

---

[14] Ibid., 79.

There is evidence in Marx's writings that, just as he regarded the ideal in general as unreal, he thought that the religious in particular was essentially illusory. The dismissal of the religious in Marx's writings helps account for this anti-religion prejudice encoded in historical materialism. In the *Grundrisse*, for example, Marx foreshadows the Weberian question by asking whether a religiously inspired encounter with the world might continue even after technical mastery over nature obviates the need for "irrational" beliefs.[15] Marx asks:

> Is the view of nature and of social relations on which the Greek imagination and hence Greek [mythology] is based possible with self-acting mule spindles and railways and locomotives and electrical telegraphs? What chances has Vulcan against Roberts & Co., Jupiter against the lightning-rod and Hermes against the Crédit Mobilier?[16]

Let us immediately focus the emphasis of this question away from the specifically *Greek* context — that is, whether a *classical*-mythological experience might persist — to the more general query regarding the potential continuation of the religious in modernity. Although Marx's views on the status of religion are more nuanced than suggested by the trite maxim "religion is the opium of the masses," he does seem to argue that the religious would not persist in technocratic modernity.[17] "All mythology," Marx writes

---

[15] Michael Löwy, "Weber Against Marx? The Polemic with Historical Materialism in the Protestant Ethic," *Science and Society* 53, no. 1 (Spring 1989): 71-83.
[16] Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1973), 110.
[17] See, John Molyneux, "More than Opium: Marxism and Religion," *International Socialism* 119 (Summer 2008).

immediately after the passage just cited, "overcomes and dominates and shapes the forces of nature in the imagination and by the imagination; *it therefore vanishes with the advent of real mastery over them*" (emphasis added.)[18] Marx's formulation captures the sense in which critical theory on the whole has tended to side with this "Weberian" conclusion that, as modern life is "rationalized," religion wanes and eventually disappears from the domain of the social. The critical tradition's supposition that modernity's *telos* is non-religious is succinctly stated by Horkheimer when he claims that, "Mankind loses religion as it moves through modernity, but the loss leaves its mark."[19]

Benjamin, however, provides a compelling interpretation of the status of the religious in modernity which is in stark contrast to most Marxian philosophies, which tend to retain the liberal assumption that religion disappears in proportion to humanity's increased technical mastery over nature. For Benjamin, modernity remains fundamentally saturated by the religious. In fact, in his mammoth *Arcades Project*, he suggests that the appearance of technology, rather than being a sign of religion's decline in the social, can instead be read as the index of the continued existence of the modern's mythic imaginary [N2a,1]. Another example from Benjamin's oeuvre which gestures towards the continued presence of the religious, can be found in his fragment of 1925, in which he speaks of modern Capital[20] as itself a religion (*SW1*, 288; *GS4*, 100.)

---

[18] Marx, *Grundrisse*, 110.
[19] Max Horkheimer, "Thoughts on Religion," in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. J. O'Connel and others (New York: Continuum, 2002), 131.
[20] Throughout this study I refer to capitalism as Capital. This precedent was set by Marx in his three volume analysis, *Capital*. According to the Uno-school, the term Capital gestures towards the fact that it appears in the social as a self-moving subject. It will be

Benjamin's texts are peppered with religious concepts, including: the Messiah, hell, the angle of history, aura, and doctrine. The religious, for Benjamin, does not vanishes in modernity, instead, it changes form.[21]

It is true, of course, that for Benjamin, as for Marx and the critical theorists more generally, the goal of theory is to provoke an awakening from the "mythic dream," from the false consciousness of "fetishized" social relationships that mask the true nature of exploitation in Capital. However, in the critical tradition influenced especially by Weber

---

argued throughout this study that as long as capitalism is experienced as an objective force beyond the self-conscious control of subjects working collectively, it is Capital, not capitalism.

[21] Benjamin's biography, too, provides many examples that he did not accept the notion that the religious represents an essentially erroneous representation of the real, but that it is a critical resource in its own right, and hence worth bringing into a constellation with a revolutionary political theory. There are his well-known friendships and fruitful intellectual exchanges with Bloch and Gershom Scholem, who, in their own way were working on the convergence of a radical politic with a theological imaginary, Bloch in the Marxian tradition, and Scholem in the Anarchist one. In this context, Löwy's suggestion is insightful. Löwy maintains that Benjamin, together with Bloch and Scholem are all part of a broader "romantic" anti-capitalist critique of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in which some continental European Jews attempted a theoretical synthesis between a biblical messianism and radical politics. According to Löwy, other well-known thinkers who belong to this movement included Gustav Landuaer, Bernard Lazare, Franz Rosenzweig, Martin Buber, and Lukacs. This merger, however, did not only occur on the left, nor was it only instigated by Jewish intellectuals. An example from the other end of the political and religious spectrum is the Catholic legal and political scholar, Carl Schmitt, who similarly argued for a certain affinity between the "secular" and the theological state. Benjamin held Schmitt in high esteem. This list represents only the most prominent of Benjamin's intellectual relationships anchored by questions of the continued role of religion in modernity. Beyond these friendships, Benjamin published in the journal *Blätter für religiösen Sozialismus* (*Pages for* [*a*] *Religious Socialism*), and he was a casual member of the *College de Sociologie*, which often theorized the religious and in which his some-time friend and colleague Georges Bataille, who himself worked on a critical sociology of religion, was a pivotal figure.

– and therefore aptly christened "Weberian Marxism"[22] by Maurice Merleau-Ponty – there exists a conflation of the sense in which becoming aware of the mystification of social relationships is related to a movement away from the experience of the religious. This move, however, is much more difficult to justify philosophically or sociologically than is generally recognized. I argue that it actually represents a liberal teleological vestige, a liberal ideological moment within critical theory.[23] Here I agree with Richard Wolin who notes that for Benjamin "orthodox Marxism had itself succumbed to a host of economic and scientific prejudices" that resulted in "rendering Marxism itself 'bourgeois.'"[24] These liberal vestiges are most evident with respect to the religious in the more mechanistic versions of Marxian theory where a positivist sociology represents the social as moving through stages of psycho-cultural evolution. Korsch notes the subterranean connection between the philosophical justification of liberalism and some "orthodox" materialists, when he writes that "vulgar Marxism is the rightful heir of positivism." I would suggest, however, that when it comes to the question of the ontological status of the religious, this distinctly liberal ideological moment reappears even in more dialectical Marxisms, such as critical theory. It is based on a myopic reading of history, where a brief moment of seeming irreligiousity is turned into a general

---

[22] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures of the Dialectic*, trans. Joseph Bien (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 29. Also see, Michael Löwy, "Figures of Weberian Marxism," *Theory and Society* 25, no. 3 (Jun. 1996): 431-446.

[23] I do not mean to suggest thereby that Weber himself is a liberal. Rather, I intend to show that aspects of Weber's theory of religion, especially the implication that religion disappears from the modern social, justifies a certain moment of liberal ideology.

[24] Richard Wolin, "Walter Benjamin's Failed Messianism: One-Way Street," *The New Republic* 222 (Jan. 2000): 37.

principle thought to express the underlying historical trajectory of humanity, or at least "western" (that is, European) culture.

Benjamin, by contrast, suggests that a non-mystified relation to the social does not escape the orbit of religion: There is no "outside" of the religious, and, consequently no matter which way society develops or "progresses," there can be no movement away from it. Whereas the mythic for Benjamin represents mystification in the Marxian sense, apprehension of the real occurs under the sign of theology, not under a rationalized, de-mythologized secularism. Many of Benjamin's writings, especially those pieces dedicated to a critique of Capital, are structured around an organizing binary distinction between myth-as-illusion versus the theological-as-the-real de-mystified, de-fetishized experience of the social. Benjamin rejects the positivist supposition, implicit in liberal teleological readings of history in which a rationalized, bureaucratized social provides the foundation for a non-symbolic, non-mediated discourse of "truth" replacing the "false consciousness" of the religious; a supposition, I argue, that tends to structure even the critical tradition's discourse regarding religion. By contrast, Benjamin suggests that the "symbolic systems"[25] of the religious remain operative even in European "secular" modernity. Modernity, according to Benjamin, is "filled in," is structured by a "symbolic" matrix, its cultural-historical "text." Despite all appearances to the contrary, in rejecting the liberal-*cum*-positivist teleological supposition in critical theory,

---

[25] Benjamin has a strong aversion to the concept of "symbol." This aversion stems from his theory of the symbol as implicated in the logic of a totalizing epistemology. However, the notion of a "symbolic system," which will be discussed more fully in Chapter One, is a sociological category close to Benjamin's theory that the social is structurally similar to a "text," and should not confused with Benjamin's critique.

Benjamin's work can be read as more in tune with the underlying logic of historical materialism than a great many of his anti-religious "historical materialist" readers have recognized.

II - Benjamin's Religious Phenomenology of the Experience of Capital

Examining the role of the religious in his work leads me to proffer the claim that Benjamin develops a philosophy of experience in which experience is at all times saturated by one or the other dimension of the religious: experience is always either mythic or theological. In a sense, Benjamin's philosophy is a phenomenological description of the experiential encounter with a social shaped by Capital. If Benjamin's philosophy of the experience of Capital has a phenomenological dimension, this phenomenology needs to be understood in the idiosyncratic manner in which he developed it. We can follow Dermot Moran in defining phenomenology as being:

> [...] a *radical* way of doing philosophy, a *practice* rather than a system. Phenomenology is best understood as a radical, anti-traditional style of philosophizing, which emphasizes the attempt to get to the truth of matters, to describe *phenomena* in the broadest sense as whatever appears in the manner in which it appears, that is as it manifests itself to consciousness, to the experiencer. As such, phenomenology's first step is to seek to avoid all misconstructions and impositions placed on experience in advance, whether these are drawn from religious or cultural traditions, from everyday common sense, or indeed, from

> science itself. Explanations are not to be imposed before the phenomena have been understood from within.[26]

Much of this description can be applied to Benjamin's philosophy. Benjamin is certainly a philosophical radical and it was perhaps this radicalism that barred his entrance to the academy. Benjamin's philosophy can also be regarded more as a practice than a system in the Enlightenment sense typified, for example, by Immanuel Kant and Hegel. His seemingly antediluvian insistence that there is such a thing as truth, that truth exists, is explored with respect to a detailed analysis of material objects. "Every feeling," writes Benjamin, "is bound to an *a priori* object, and the representation of this object is its phenomenology" (*Tragic Drama*, 139; *GS1*; 319.)[27] As Theodor W. Adorno understood:

> For Benjamin everything habitually excluded by the norms of experience ought to become part of experience to the extent that it adheres to its own concreteness instead of dissipating this, its immortal aspect, by subordinating it to the schema of the abstract universal. Benjamin thereby placed himself in stark opposition to all modern philosophy with the possible exception of the peerless Hegel who knew that to establish a limit always also means to overstep it – and made it easy for those

---

[26] Dermot Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (London: Routledge, 2001), 4.
[27] Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum International, 2005). "*Jedes Gefühl ist gebunden an einen apriorischen Gegenstand und dessen Darstellung ist seine Phänomenologie.*"

> who dispute the rigor of his thought to dismiss it as scattered insights, as merely subjective, merely aesthetic, or as merely a metaphysical world view.[28]

In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno further notes that:

> This is why the method is called phenomenological, in passive relation to phenomena. As Hegel applied it, it was already what Benjamin would later call 'dialectics at a standstill' far advanced beyond whatever would appear as phenomenology a hundred years later.[29]

In his essay "Benjamin, Heidegger and the Destruction of Tradition," Howard Caygill suggests that Benjamin's oeuvre can be read as a life-long critical engagement with aspects of Martin Heidegger's phenomenology.[30] The differences in their work are substantial and should not be ignored for the sake of an interesting comparison. Nonetheless, Benjamin's underlying move to focus on the concept of experience together with his rejection of the positivist tradition, at times brings his thought close to that of Heidegger and the other phenomenologists. Benjamin's dislike for Heidegger's work is well known. In a letter written in 1931, for example, Benjamin tells his good friend Gershom Scholem that he and Brecht were planning a reading group whose purpose it would be to "annihilate Heidegger," whose *Being and Time* had been published a few years earlier (*SW2*, 841; *Correspondences*, 365). Perhaps this vitriol taken together with

---

[28] Theodor A. Adorno, "Introduction to Benjamin's Schriften," in *On Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Recollections*, ed. Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1988), 4.
[29] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 156-57.
[30] Howard Caygill, "Benjamin, Heidegger and the Destruction of Tradition," in *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, ed. Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2000).

his reference to Edmund Husserl's philosophy as simply incomprehensible, could be read in the context of someone trying to distance himself from precisely those with whom he had, intellectually speaking, a great deal in common.

However, one part of Moran's definition does not quite apply. As I will argue, Benjamin insists that experience, especially the experience of Capital, is shaped by a cultural-symbolic text that cannot be excluded *a priori* from the analysis. Benjamin's phenomenology is a philosophy of experience in which experience is shaped, conditioned, and suffused with meaning by always already being "linguistic." Indeed, as I will argue below, much of Benjamin's work consists in re-establishing the centrality of meaning against the attempt in positivism to eliminate the subjective dimension from the encounter with the real. The "linguistic," "textual," or "meaning-making" dimension of experience accounts for the centrality of myth and theology in his philosophy. Thus, despite any possible convergences with Heidegger and other phenomenologists, the present study will examine Benjamin's religious philosophy of experience, his "phenomenology" on its own terms. Since, by Benjamin's own admission, Heidegger represents, if anything, a purely negative influence, this study will not include Heidegger as part of the analysis. By contrast, Henri Bergson, whose theories Benjamin relied upon to develop his notion of experience in relation to memory, is brought into the analysis. With respect to Bergson, Detlev Schöttker suggests that there are echoes of the thoughts of Maurice Halbwachs in Benjamin's work. Halbwachs spent much of his career attempting to merge Bergson's "phenomenological theory of memory," with a notion of a

collective (un)conscious developed by Émile Durkheim.[31] However, since this study is an inquiry into the nature of religion in Benjamin's work, and not into how much or in which way Benjamin is a member of the phenomenological tradition, the works of other phenomenologists from Husserl to Halbwachs, Heidegger to Emmnauel Levinas remain absent from this analysis. Not the phenomenologists, but Plato, Augustine, Kant, Hegel, the Marburg Neokantians and other critical theorists are some of the thinkers who are brought into a constellation with Benjamin's thought in order to provide a more illuminating exegesis of his texts with respect to the status of the religious.

III – Benjamin's Critique of the Positivist Moment

The focus on Benjamin's philosophy of experience, on what I am calling his "religious phenomenology of the encounter with Capital," leads me to theorize the role that religious concepts play in his analysis of the social. Essentially, I argue that Benjamin's deployment of religious concepts allows his theory to capture aspects of the social that are missed in secular social theory. That is to say, because Benjamin focuses on how the social is actually experienced, rather than on prescriptive notions of how it should be experienced, it becomes evident that the religious needs to be retained as a

---

[31] Detlev Schöttker, "Erinnern," in *Benjamins Begriffe*, vol. 1, ed. Michael Opitz and Erdmund Wizisla (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2000), 277. In this regard see also, Maurice Halbwachs, *Sources of Religious Sentiment*, trans. John A. Spaulding (The Free Press of Glencoe, 1962), in which the author notes his reliance on Durkheim's theory of religion, writing "The work here offered to the reader is as exact, even literal, a summary of these [Durkheim's] ideas as possible [....]"

necessary explanatory element. The leitmotif of the present study is aptly formulated by Löwy, when he asks:

> A century after August Comte, sociology continues to borrow its conceptual terminology from physics or biology. Is it not time to break away from this positivist tradition and to draw upon a spiritual and cultural heritage that is broader, richer in meaning and closer to the very texture of social facts? Why not use the vast semantic field of religions, myths, literature and even esoteric traditions to enrich the language of the social sciences?[32]

As Alfred North Whitehead explains, it is precisely that factor which gives the sciences their explanatory power in the domain of nature that makes their methodology and their concepts so unsuitable for elucidating the realm of human sociality. In the early modern scientific paradigm that can be seen informing the works of Isaac Newton and Galileo Galilei, for example, which eventually furnishes the underlying logic of positivism and the scientistic ideology of liberalism, the physical universe is conceived as being composed of dead matter, without meaning or agency. "This," Whitehead notes, "is the grand doctrine of nature as a self-sufficient, meaningless complex of facts."[33] He continues:

---

[32] Michael Löwy, *Redemption and Utopia: Jewish Libertarian Thought in Central Europe: A study in Elective Affinity*, trans. Hope Heaney (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 6.

[33] Alfred North Whitehead, *Modes of Thought* (New York: The Free Press, 1968), 132. Cf. Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, trans. Lorenzo Chiesa (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011). Noteworthy for the subsequent argument is that Agamben locates the intellectual

> The origin of this persuasion is the dualism which gradually developed in European thought in respect to mind and nature. At the beginning of the modern period Descartes expressed this dualism with the utmost distinctness. For him, there are material substances with spatial relations, and mental substances. The mental substances are external to the material substances. Neither type requires the other type for the completion of its essence.[34]

The explanatory power of this method for the natural sciences is not being disputed here. However, the problem that Whitehead identifies is that the ontology of the natural sciences rests on a conception of nature that is both dead and meaningless, the exact opposite of what is at issue in the social realm. Concepts such as life, consciousness and purpose are necessary categories for an explanation of the social. "Newton's methodology for physics was an overwhelming success. But the forces which he introduced left nature still without meaning or value."[35] "Newton," continues Whitehead, "thus illustrated a great philosophical truth, that a dead nature can give no reasons. All ultimate reasons are in terms of aim at value [*sic*]. A dead nature aims at nothing."[36] The philosophical underpinnings of positivist sociology is an ontology in which the social is conceived as basically equivalent to the status of matter in physics, that is as meaningless and dead, interacting in the vacuum of space, governed by natural laws, not by agency or

---

origins of the mind-body divide roughly a thousand years before Descartes, in the doctrinal disputes over Trinitarian theology.

[34] Whitehead, *Modes of Thought*, 149.

[35] Ibid., 134.

[36] Ibid., 135.

purpose. Not human agency and free will, but social laws that function much as natural laws do, are thought to determine human life.

A "science" of the social predicated on an ontology in which meaning is excluded *a priori* from the analysis is a contradiction; it is liberal ideology. This ideological reduction of the ontological needs to be replaced by a conception of the real in which mind is drawn into the social, in which the ideal realm, meaning, is recognized as intrinsic to the real of the social. Whitehead notes that, "The sharp-cut scientific classifications are essential for scientific method. But they are dangerous for philosophy."[37] Indeed, "All explanations of the sociological functionings of mankind include aim as an essential factor in explanation."[38] Whitehead's solution to the illegitimate use of categories drawn from the natural sciences to elucidate the social also highlights what I consider important for understanding Benjamin's general philosophical approach:

> The doctrine that I am maintaining is that neither physical nature nor life can be understood unless we fuse them together as essential factors in the composition of "really real" things whose interconnections and individual characters constitute the universe.[39]

Exactly this, I claim, is what Benjamin does within the general framework of Marxian social theory. This approach also dovetails with Löwy's suggestion that categories which come to us from human history are more adequate to expressing what is at issue in the social than positivist categories drawn from the natural sciences.

---

[37] Ibid., 157.
[38] Ibid., 155.
[39] Ibid., 150.

According to Liselotte Wiesenthal, it is precisely "art, mythology, theology and metaphysics" that for Benjamin are the spheres in which a certain truth, the idea, can be represented.[40] Benjamin re-introduces the vast semiotic domain of Europe's non-positivist tradition into his critical theory of culture, which for him also includes the religious.

Throughout his oeuvre, there are certain intellectual "enemies" with whom Benjamin feels the need to do battle. Although these enemies are varied, Benjamin believes them to be united by a common mistake. In his essays he takes aim at "bourgeois" linguistics and historiography, as well as the aesthetic theories of vulgar Marxists and traditionalists. Of course, Benjamin is a virulent critic of fascism, while at the same time highly skeptical of Social Democratic policies vis-à-vis the German working class, as well as of Stalinism. Benjamin himself noted his unwillingness to form any sort of alliances, writing in "Berlin Chronicle," that his habit of walking half a step behind his mother signaled his "stubborn refusal under any circumstances to form a united front, be it even with my own mother" (*SW2*, 600; *GS4*, 471.)[41] Philosophically, Benjamin's thought is similarly hard to categorize. He seems to share important ideas

---

[40] Liselotte Wiesenthal, *Zur Wissenschaftstheorie Walter Benjamins* (Frankfurt a.M.: Athenäum Verlag, 1973), 204. "*Kunst, Mythologie, Theologie und Metaphysik haben dabei die Funktion, diejenige Sphäre zu bilden, in der Entwürfe der Wahrheit, Ideen, vor aller wissenschaftlichen Erkenntnis dargestellt werden können.*" My translation: "Art, mythology, theology and metaphysics have thereby the function of building that sphere in which the delineation of truth, the idea, can be represented for all modes of knowledge."

[41] The full German sentence reads: "*Vielleicht, daß man die gleiche Sabotage des wirklichen gesellschaftlichen Daseins noch später, in der geschilderten Verhaltungsweise bei den Gängen durch die City wiederfindet in Gestlat des eigensinnigen Vorbehalts, in keinem Falle eine Front, und sei es mit der eignen Mutter, zu bilden.*"

with the phenomenologists who were his contemporaries, and at the same time dismisses much of their thought out of hand. He was both attracted to the Neokantians and simultaneously repelled by large swaths of their philosophy. Benjamin's enemies seem to surround him on all sides, from the political far left to the political far right, from the philosophically adventurous to the intellectually conservative. His disagreement with these "enemies" can be generalized as expressing his underlying suspicion of any thought that arises from an atomistic ontology; it is a critique of a certain positivist moment.

Benjamin, however, is less concerned with the positivist tradition as such than with positivist elements that inform or, perhaps, infect a great many social theories, political programs and philosophical schools that were dominant at the time he was writing. As Whitehead notes:

> The state of modern thought is that every single item in this general [positivist] doctrine is denied but that the general conclusions from the doctrine as a whole are tenaciously retained. The result is a complete muddle in scientific thought, in philosophical cosmology.[42]

That is, even when social theories and the philosophies which inform them do not openly subscribe to positivism, elements of the positivist outlook can, nonetheless, remain part of a general set of philosophical presuppositions. This applies to the status of August Comte's theory of religion within many contemporary approaches to religion. Although for most theorists, especially in the critical tradition, Comte's work represents little more than a historical curiosity, his general notion of psychic stages of evolution that move

---

[42] Whitehead, *Modes of Thought*, 132.

humanity through various religious epochs has been tenaciously retained. Indeed, it may be useful in this regard to take recourse to the notion of "zombie ideas." This whimsical formulation references the fact that certain ideas seem to persist as self-evident background assumptions even though there is no longer a credible theoretical basis to support them. Zombie ideas are ideas that should be dead, but continue to roam our ideational landscape.[43]

Since Benjamin is less interested in the positivists *per se* than in the persistence of positivist notions, he does not engage in a critique of Rudolf Carnap, for example, but rather of the scientism that underlies the Kantian concept of experience. Although he mentions Herbert Spencer in passing, he does not directly critique him, nor does he tackle Comte's notion that the human social moves through various stages of psycho-cultural "evolution." Nonetheless, he is severely critical when this pseudo-evolutionary theory appears in the German Social Democratic Party's assertion that objective historical conditions are continuously improving, or when this is made part of a "bourgeois" theory of history. For Benjamin, then, it is less the tradition of positivism itself that is the object of his critique, but rather the positivist assumption that the social is essentially similar to matter in physics, dead, meaningless, and without agency.

Benjamin's approach also informs the method of this present study. Throughout, Benjamin's thought will be presented as a critique of the positivist *elements* in social theory and philosophy. As in the case of the phenomenologists, I will not be presenting

---

[43] See John Quiggin, *Zombie Economics: How Dead Ideas Still Walk among Us* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2010).

Benjamin vis-à-vis major representatives of the positivist tradition, not the Vienna school nor the Anglo-American traditions. The term positivist is here, as it is in Benjamin's work, a stand-in for the more general insistence that a scientific discourse defines the ontological horizon of social theory, a discourse from which human subjectivity and agency is eliminated as much as possible.

IV – Benjamin's Critical Onto-Epistemology

Part of the reason Benjamin considers the modern social as informed by the religious is that his philosophy is predicated on an ontology of internal relations. Benjamin makes this point in a wonderfully charming example, characteristically relying on an impressionistic rather than positivist description. Benjamin writes:

> I had to clear a way for myself to the farthest corner. There I would come upon my socks, which lay piled in traditional fashion – that is to say, rolled up and turned inside out, so that every pair had the appearance of a little pocket. For me, nothing surpassed the pleasure of thrusting my hand as deeply as possible into the pocket's interior. I did not do this simply for the sake of its woolly warmth. It was "the little present" rolled up inside that I always held in my hand and that in this way drew me into the depths. When I had closed my fist around it and, so far as I was able, made certain that I possessed the stretchable woolen mass, there began the second phase of that game, which brought with it the momentous unveiling. For now I went on to unwrap "the present," to tease it out of its woolen pocket. I drew it ever nearer to me until something rather disconcerting was accomplished: "the present" was

> wholly wrested from its pocket, but the latter itself was no longer around. I could not put this enigmatic truth to the test often enough: *the truth, namely, that form and content, veil and veiled, "the present" and the pocket, were one. They were one – and, to be sure, a third thing too: the sock into which they had both been transformed.* (*SW3*, 401; *GS4*, 284; emphasis added)[44]

As Herbert Marcuse demonstrates in *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory*, the ontology of internal relations is the fundamental frame of reference that accounts for the critical moment in critical theory.[45] From this perspective, subject and object are not regarded as two irreconcilable moments, but are constituted through continuous co-mediation. By contrast, the underlying ontology of much of liberal social theory, including parts of Weber's sociology of religion, and evident in the allergic reaction of many Weberian-Marxists to the religious, is to some informed by the positivist outlook. It is based on a view of the social universe as governed by the law of human psychic evolution, in which the religious is eventually left behind.

---

[44] "*Ich mußte mir Bahn bis in den hinteren Winkel machen; dann stieß ich auf meine Strümpfe, welche da gahäuft und in althergebrachter Art, gerollt und eingeschlagen, ruhten, so daß jedes Paar das Aussehen einer kleinen Tasche hatte. Nichts ging mir über das Vergnügen, meine Hand so tief wie möglich in ihr Inneres zu versenken. Und nicht nur ihrer wolligen Wärme wegen. Es war 'Das Mitgebrachte,' das ich immer im eingerollten Innern in der Hand hielt und das mich derart in die Tiefe zog. Wenn ich es mit der Faust umspannt und mich nach Kräften in dem Besitz der weichen, wollenen Masse bestätigt hatte, fing der zweite Teil des Spiels an, der die atemraubende Enthüllung brachte. Denn nun ging ich daran, 'Das Mitgebrachte' seiner Tasche ganz entwunden, jedoch sie selbts nich mehr vorhanden war. Nich oft genug konnte ich so die Probe auf jene rätselhafte Wahreit machen: daß Form und Inhalt, Hülle und Verhülltes, 'Das Mitgebrachte' und die Tasche eins waren.*"

[45] Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1941).

Like most critical theorists arguing against "vulgar materialism," Benjamin too believes that the real is not simply an existent independent of the subject but is mediated by the subject as the subject is by the real. This onto-epistemic assumption allows Benjamin to situate the "symbolic dimension" within the social. What distinguishes Benjamin's approach from that of other critical theorists is that he extends this insight to encompass the religious as well. For Benjamin the religious is constitutive of the social as experienced by embodied human subjects. A loose homology to Hegel's critique of Kant's idealism might be drawn on here so as to articulate what is salient in Benjamin's assumption. Kant suggested that the "pure intuitions" of time and space are not found in the noumenal dimension of the real, in the real that is hypothesized to exist somewhere beyond the subject, but are attributed to the real by the subject. The real is never experienced without these intuitions: one could argue therefore, as Hegel did, that what is meant by the real necessarily includes time and space, even if these categories are in themselves ideal, that is, contributed to the experience of the real by subjectivity. At the ontological level, Hegel's critique of Kant is directed at the latter's atomism from the perspective of reality constituted relationally. For Kant, there is a real beyond the subject, whereas for Hegel the real is that which is constituted *with* the subject.

Benjamin pursues the same strategy against mechanical materialist readings of the social, against the positivist moment in social theory. For Benjamin, the social is constituted in part by the psychic life of the subject, which includes the religious cultural text. It is this "text" that provides the categories which are drawn on to mediate and, simultaneously, constitute the experience of the real. Even if the religious is not part of

an ontic reality existing in some autarkic isolation beyond the subject, it remains part of the real as constituted by subjectivity. This, after all, is how the real is defined from the perspective of an ontology of internal relations. The notion that religious representations and experiences are left behind once the ideal moment is recognized as a contribution made by subjectivity, strikes me as equivalent to arguing that once the Kantian categories of time and space are understood for what they are, they too can be subtracted from the experience of the real. The resistance to Benjamin's inclusion of these concepts, especially by his more reductive Marxian materialist readers, results, I claim, from this unacknowledged positivism within some less self-reflective historical materialist theories.

Benjamin's attentive readers will no doubt have noticed that many of his essays are structured around key conceptual dichotomies. Often he juxtaposes two seemingly similar concepts, such as law and justice, in order to demonstrate that they are by no means synonymous, but actually spring from two fundamentally different ways of encountering the world. Indeed, these conceptual distinctions gesture towards two elemental but opposed onto-epistemic positions: one inscribes the possibility of freedom while the other encodes a psychic bondage. Benjamin's strategy in each of these works is the same: move the reader to recognize the fundamental distinction between the two seemingly similar, or mutually dependent concepts, by recognizing the essential difference in the world views from which these concepts arise. For Benjamin, law, for example, does not provide justice, but brings merely the semblance of justice. His formulation in the "Karl Kraus" essay, in which he suggests that Kraus identified the

"high treason of law against justice," (*SW2*, 444; *GS2*, 348)[46] indicates that Benjamin believes these concepts to be entirely distinct. The notion that for X crime Y punishment should be meted out binds humanity to a prearranged fate that does not fulfill the biblical conception of radical freedom; a notion shared by some Anarcho-Marxist traditions. Although the notion of law seems to be deployed in order to attain justice, Benjamin claims it actually produces the opposite: it gives rise to injustice.

In Benjamin's work, these conceptual dichotomies are re-duplicated in various theoretical registers, or at various philosophical "levels." In each of these registers the same fundamental distinction is at issue. For example, in his *Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin structures his arguments around the opposition of symbol to allegory. As in the "Karl Kraus" piece the main distinction in "Critique of Violence," is between law and justice, to which is added the distinction between fate and history. In "The Mimetic Faculty," it is the category of mimesis that is shown to be distinct from play. In "The Storyteller," it is between "short experience" and "long experience." Each time it is the second term, in this admittedly adumbrated list, which points towards an onto-epistemology of freedom whereas the first is predicated on a foundation of psychic servitude.

In point of fact, however, this schema is a little too simplistic. While Benjamin often structures his essays around a simple binary opposition, a closer reading suggests that these binaries are not always mutually exclusive, but could also be thought to occupy different ends of a continuum. Indeed, they also include a moment of relation. One

---

[46] "*Sie lautet auf Hochverrat des Rechtes an der Gerechtigkeit.*"

example will suffice. Benjamin understands mimesis as the faculty that binds subjectivity to the natural, to the mythic, to bondage. Its opposing category is the freedom inherent in play. However, some of his essays, such as "Berlin Childhood around 1900," and the 1936 version of his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility," suggest that mimesis is intimately related to play. Mimesis, while utterly distinct from play when seen from one perspective, is also shown to be related to play when seen from another. Keeping the relational moment in mind, I maintain that there remains a certain logic to reading Benjamin as constructing binary oppositions, especially since the most fundamental opposition in his thought establishes the logic that informs all the other binaries in his philosophy.

All these dichotomies, I suggest, reproduce at their respective philosophical "levels" the most all encompassing onto-epistemic dichotomy, that between myth and theology. The mythic might not in fact appear as the opposite of the theological. Indeed, from a contemporary sociological perspective, one might be tempted to include the mythic and the theological under the general notion of religion, as I do in Chapter One. However, Benjamin's opposition has its origins in biblical theology. The myth-theology distinction can already be noted in the first biblical creation story in Genesis 1. A close reading suggests that the authors of the first creation story attempted to distance the biblical tradition from the Babylonian creation myth to which the Genesis account is clearly philologically indebted. This is textually marked by not naming the sun and moon directly as objects of creation, a conspicuous deviation from the text as it is narrated up to that point. However, since in many ancient languages related to the bible, the concepts

sun and moon were simultaneously the names of the pagan gods for those phenomena, the authors replaced these designators with the rather awkward "God made the two great lights – the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night [....]"[47] This substitution has been read as indicating that the biblical authors did not want to evoke the notion of other deities.

As I argue in Chapter Two, God has often been equated with truth, especially in many biblical religio-philosophic traditions. For Benjamin, the myth-theology distinction has great significance, since it describes the most fundamental relationship to reality. God as Whitehead's "really real" can be encountered theologically, that is correctly, or mythically, that is erroneously. In a curiously traditional reading given Benjamin's Marxian politics, he takes the biblical tradition seriously by suggesting that a theological relationship to the real is one that establishes a totally free subjectivity. From this fundamental position follow the secondary tropes of freedom. In a sense, there is a re-doubling or perhaps a repetition of the mythic-theological dichotomy at each "level" of human existence. In that sense, it could be argued that this elemental opposition is translated into each dimension of the social.

The notion that everything can be translated, and that simultaneously every translation also misses what is essential, is a central theoretical proposition as well as methodological approach that defines a great deal of Benjamin's philosophy, and simultaneously also accounts for why his work is sometimes so difficult to interpret.

---

[47] Gen.1.1 Cf. "The Epic of Creation," in *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, The Flood, Gilgamesh, and others*, trans. and ed. Stephanie Dalley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 228-277.

Since Benjamin's theory of language will be analyzed in Chapter Three, at present I simply want to indicate the centrality to his work of the notion of translation as a philosophical method. Perhaps the *Arcades Project* is the text where this logic of translating concepts between philosophical registers is most apparent. Benjamin will often make the same point in various discursive idioms. For example, Benjamin expresses the difference between the mythic and the theological, that is, the difference between experiencing the appearances and the essence of capitalist modernity, with the psychoanalytic concepts of dream and awakening. The essential structure however is identical, but expressed in a different register. This method of "translating" between idioms is derived from Johann Georg Hamann, whose notion of "metaschematizing," was a methodological approach in which relations rather than definitions are emphasized.[48] In the *Arcades* the logic of translation, or metaschematizing, is expanded to include certain "Benjaminian archetypes." The figures of the revolutionary, the historian, the art critic and the biblical exegete all occupy an essentially homologous position with respect to interpretation. The art critic is to interpret the work of art the way the historian is to interpret history. Both relate to their objects of interpretation in essentially the same way as the revolutionary relates to the social. Like with the mythic and theological dichotomy, it is the biblical exegete whose relationship to the Holy Book provides the paradigmatic relation to the "really real" that informs all the "secondary" conceptual oppositions.

---

[48] See for example, Georg Johann Hamann, *Writings on Philosophy and Language*, trans. and ed. Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

The myth-theology dichotomy in Benjamin's work expresses the divergent onto-epistemic positions encoded in an (liberal positivist) atomistic universe on the one hand, and the Marxian dialectic, that is, an ontology of internal relations, of mind fused with physical matter, on the other. For Benjamin, an ontology of internal relations is the conceptual starting point that must be established, if liberation from the psychic bondage imposed by the forms and appearances of Capital is to be accomplished. While Marx theorized the objective conditions that keep the working class in servitude, Benjamin analyzes how these forces impact experience in a way that encodes a world-view contrary to one needed to effect change. This is the ideological status of science in liberalism, or the positivist moment in social theory. If the social domain is seen as an extension of the natural domain, as a world in which meaning is illusory and human beings are not free but determined by natural laws, then it follows that there is no real agency in the social realm. This view encapsulates the onto-epistemic position Benjamin references as myth as well as second order mythic concepts such as, fate, pagan, pagan gods and the like.

V – The Reception

The uncritically accepted liberal assumption in much of Marxian social theory, which suggests that the religious is a false representation of the real, and the recognition of the essential falseness of religion is a sign of cultural maturity, what Wiesenthal has referred to as a "hostility to theology" (*Theologie-Feindlichckeit*)[49] has meant that many of Benjamin's readers have noted a contradiction at the heart of his attempt to wed

[49] Wiesenthal, *Zur Wissenschaftstheorie Walter Benjamins*, 194.

theology and Marxism. The attempt to mitigate this ostensible contradiction has characterized a great deal of the scholarship dedicated to the question of Benjamin and the religious. Since it is generally taken for granted in this literature that the modern social is not really religious, or, on the philosophical level, that materialism (especially a Marxian materialism) necessarily resists a religious metaphysic, one aspect of Benjamin's thought tends to be valorized while another is suppressed. This exegetical approach in the secondary literature is noted by Pierre Missac's who writes:

> Faced with the complexity of Benjamin's personality and the difficulty of classifying his *oeuvre*, exegetes readily fall back on the theme of opposites. They portray their author as either 'seated between two chairs' (*zwischen den Stühlen*) or as oscillating between atheism and theology. One such interpreter underscores the contradictions in Baudelaire studies, while another, in an analysis and explanation based on oxymoron, characterizes Benjamin as a mystic or a Marxist rabbi – as a sort of hermetic socialist.[50]

Scholem provides one example of this either-or reading when he suggests that there is an "authentic" and an "inauthentic" Benjamin, the latter being the one who uses "communist phraseology." In a letter written to Benjamin in March of 1931, Scholem writes:

> [...] it seems to me that it would be clear to any impartial reader of your writings that in the last few years you have been trying – forgive me for saying so, but

---

[50] Pierre Missac, "Walter Benjamin: From Rupture to Shipwreck," in *On Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Recollections*, 211-12.

> desperately trying – to present your insights, which are in part far-reaching, in phraseology that is conceptually close to Communist phraseology. It also seems clear, however – and to me this is what seems important – that there is a disconcerting alienation and disjuncture between your *true* and *alleged* way of thinking. That is, you do not attain your insights through the strict application of a materialistic method, but entirely independently of it (in the best case) or (in the worst case, as in some of the essays of the last two years) by playing with the ambiguities and interference phenomena of this method. As you yourself quite aptly write Mr. Rychner, your own solid knowledge grows out of, to be brief, the metaphysics of language. This is the most appropriate subject in which you, having achieved undistorted clarity, could be a highly significant figure in the history of critical thought, the legitimate heir of the most productive and most genuine traditions of Hamann and Humboldt. On the other hand, your ostensible attempt to harness these results in a framework in which they suddenly present themselves as the apparent result of materialistic considerations introduces an entirely alien element from which any intelligent reader can easily distance himself.
>
> (*Correspondences*, 374)

Another approach that de-emphasizes the co-existence of religious and Marxian themes, one echoed in much of the secondary literature, was first articulated by Adorno and his students, especially Hermann Schwepenhäuser and Jürgen Habermas. Adorno and company attempt to overcome this ostensible contradiction by dividing Benjamin's

life into an early metaphysical phase and a later historical materialist one.[51] Habermas summarizes this reading when he writes:

> No interpretation [...] can dismiss Benjamin's break with esotericism. In the face of the rise of fascism, political insight forced Benjamin to break with that esotericism of the true for which the young Benjamin had reserved the dogmatic concept of doctrine.[52]

Wiesenthal suggests that *One-Way Street*, perhaps finished sometime in 1926, represents the work in which the transition to his later period becomes visible. In this division, *Tragic Drama* would still be counted as an "early" piece.[53] Alternatively, the fateful talks Benjamin had with Adorno and Horkheimer in 1927, which have since come to be known as the "Königstein conversations,"[54] in which the latter reportedly impressed upon Benjamin the importance of Marxian theories often serves as another pivotal event marking his break from "esotericism," and a turn to "historical materialism."

What Habermas sees as a "break" and what Scholem regards as "inauthentic," is, as Scholem noted in his letter, signaled in Benjamin's oeuvre by the emergence of historical materialist terminology, especially in texts stemming from the 1930s. Benjamin himself attests to his late discovery of Marx, and it is clear from even a cursory glance that he increasingly uses Marxian concepts, especially after beginning his friendship with Brecht in the late 1920s. Yet, these readings which see in this lexical shift

---

[51] Ibid., 210-11.
[52] Jürgen Habermas, "Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique," in *On Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Recollections*, 109.
[53] Wiesenthal, *Zur Wissenschaftstheorie Walter Benjamins*, 2.
[54] See "Chronology 1929 – 1934" in *SW2*, 834.

a "break" with his "metaphysical" interests strike me as somewhat forced.[55] Indeed, in this respect I would go so far as to agree with Wiesenthal, when she suggests that for a thorough understanding of Benjamin's thought it is vital to maintain a certain distance from Adorno and his students' interpretation of his works.[56] Contrary to Habermas's suggestion, for example, there is abundant textual evidence that Benjamin worked towards a theoretical synthesis of religious and materialist paradigms. Beyond the already mentioned works of "Karl Kraus," "The Author as Producer," and the "Theses," there is the towering *Arcades Project*, his early fragment "Capitalism as Religion," among many others. For the present analysis it is important to note that Benjamin's synthesis does not only take place at the rhetorical level, as Scholem's comments seem to imply. Rather, Benjamin's synthesis fuses Marxism and religion at the philosophical level. As will be demonstrated in Chapters Two and Three especially, even when Benjamin does not rely explicitly on religious concepts, his thoughts, his method of inquiry, and his manner of presentation remain suffused with the religious.

With respect to the theory that there exists an early and a late Benjamin, it strikes me as no small irony that his own works should be read in precisely the way he argued

---

[55] See, for example, Wiesenthal, *Zur Wissenschaftstheorie Walter Benjamins*, 57 – 70. As Wiesenthal notes, even here the supposed break between Benjamin's "life periods" can be exaggerated. Wiesenthal suggests that the dialectical-image is a later terminological reference for what in earlier texts was the notion of the extreme. It is quite possible, therefore, that the break between an early and later Benjamin is more apparent than real.

[56] Wiesenthal, *Zur Wissenschaftstheorie Walter Benjamins*, 188. "*Eine Distanz zu Adornos und seiner Schüler Interpretation ist für das Verständnis der Gedanken Walter Benjamins unerläßlich*" My translation: "For an understanding of Walter Benjamin's thought it is indispensible to maintain a distance from the interpretations of Adorno and his students."

history should not be interpreted, namely in a teleological and linear manner. History, for him, is not the progress of thought from error to truth. This liberal or, what Benjamin called "bourgeois" view of history, simply justifies the present as a necessary and expected outcome. It strikes me as remarkable that with Benjamin and the religious this view of history is at play in a double-sense. The liberal representation of the social as one in which the religious has been overcome is at least in part the cause for the resistance to the co-existence of these themes in his philosophy. At the same time, the solution to the problem generated by this liberal presupposition is a teleological reading of Benjamin's own work, in which his ideas move (like the social supposedly does) from an early metaphysics to a later atheistic materialism.

By contrast, I suggest that we not engage in a chronological reading of Benjamin's oeuvre, nor deny that he attempted a synthesis of these modes of thought. Rather, I propose we read Benjamin's texts as his theory seems to imply they be read, namely, in the manner of biblical exegesis and commentary, perhaps even typologically, in which the emphasis is placed not on a linear progression but on the re-occurrence of themes that are expressed in various registers and in his various pieces of writing. Reading Benjamin's works typologically is to metaschematize. It is, I suggest, to read Benjamin the way he himself reads texts.

The present analysis takes a simpler approach to the question of religion in Benjamin's philosophy than do the glosses provided by much of the secondary literature. I suggest we take Benjamin at his word, namely, that his work represents an attempt to *merge* a Marxian materialism with a religious imaginary. I propose that instead of

beginning with the *a priori* assumption that this cannot be accomplished, as Scholem and Habermas seem to, we ask rather, in what way *can* it be accomplished? I suggest that we read Benjamin as issuing a challenge to Marxian philosophy regarding the relation of the real and the ideal, specifically regarding the metaphysical status of the religious in relation to the material. In what way can a religious-*cum*-metaphysical world view be brought fruitfully into conversation with a Marxian materialism? At the outset, of course, this theoretical reorientation does not pre-empt the conclusion. It is still possible, even with this new question, that the answer might result in a simple negative, that is that there is no way in which a Marxian materialism can be fruitfully combined with a religious metaphysic. I will argue throughout the present study, that there are coherent logical and historical arguments suggesting that this merger can, in fact, succeed, and, indeed, that by re-introducing precisely the religious within a Marxian discourse, Benjamin makes critical theory *more* critical. Benjamin's use of the religious challenges a core liberal assumption, based on an inherently liberal teleology, one which I suggest is echoed even in many versions of historical materialist philosophies, including much of critical theory. I claim, however, that Benjamin's inclusion of the religious does not necessitate him having to jettison the underlying materialist assumptions of Marxian philosophy. The key, I argue, is to be found in how the concept of religion is theorized.

In Chapter One, I argue that the hegemonic influence of Weber's theories of religion on critical theory, especially as it is characterized in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, has resulted in what I take to be a misreading of the role of religion in Benjamin's philosophy. The arguments in the *Protestant Ethic* encode a certain liberal

teleological view of history already present in Comte, in which the religious is left behind as European culture becomes more technologically advanced and the social ever more rationalized and bureaucratized. Contrary to the view presented in much of the secondary literature on Benjamin and religion, the question of whether the modern European social was ever free of the religious is a highly contestable point. What strikes me as incontrovertible, however, is that this approach to the social is *not* operative in Benjamin's analysis. Although he occasionally uses the concept secularism, his entire oeuvre is based on the theory that the modern is infused with the deleterious illusions of myth, and that the only solution is a theological one. I suggest that it is, therefore, dubious to accept uncritically a Weberian formulation of the religious as being suitable for interpreting Benjamin's philosophy. Thus, the present study begins by problematizing the concept of religion itself, an approach that to my knowledge has so far remained largely untested by the secondary literature.

> To some extent, I would agree with Margret Kohlenbach, when she writes that: More often than not the literature on Benjamin combines a superficial empathy for his work with a lack of clarity about its character [....] The lack of clarity is perhaps most evident in the confused use of such words a 'theory,' 'philosophy,' 'experience,' 'theology,' or 'secularization.'"[57]

Surprisingly, however, given the title of her book, *Walter Benjamin: Self-Reference and Religiosity*, and after opening with such a strong condemnation of the secondary

---

[57] Margarete Kohlenbach, *Walter Benjamin : Self-reference and Religiosity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), ix.

literature, the author herself makes almost no effort to theorize adequately the concept of religion. Kohlenbach is not alone. She is representative of the very problem she identifies, one which is almost ubiquitous in the scholarly literature on Benjamin and religion.

Instead of theorizing the concept of religion in the abstract, studies dedicated to Benjamin's inclusion of the religious have tended to focus on more concrete instantiations of the general notion. For example, Benjamin's relationship to Judaism in general, or his knowledge of Kabbala in particular represent themes commonly broached in the secondary literature.[58] Eric Jacobson's *Metaphysics of the Profane: The Political Theology of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem* is exemplary of this line of analysis.[59] Similarly, the role of specific religious concepts, such as the auratic, are made topics of inquiry. More recently, concepts that appear to negate the religious, such as the profane and the secular have been brought into a constellation with Benjamin's thought.[60] It is true that many of the studies dedicated to examining specific concepts, including religiously inspired ones, are excellent and do not need to be improved upon. *Benjamins Begriffe*, a two-volume analysis of key concepts in Benjamin's oeuvre is perhaps the paragon of this method of inquiry. However, themes such as Judaism, and religiously

---

[58] Cf. Wiesenthal, *Zur Wissenschaftstheorie Walter Benjamins*, 116. The disproportionate interest in Benjamin's Judaism represented in the secondary literature is somewhat curious given the fact that he frequently confessed to knowing almost nothing about it, especially about the Kabbala.

[59] Jacobson, *Metaphysics of the Profane*.

[60] See, for example, Sigrid Weigel, *Walter Benjamin: Die Kreatur, das Heilige, die Bilder* (Frankfurt, a. M.: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2008); Daniel Weidner, ed., *Profanes Leben: Walter Benjamins Dialektik der Säkularisierung* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2010).

inspired concepts, such as the messianic, can be subsumed under the more general concept of religion, or perhaps the religious, which will be used interchangeably throughout this study.[61] The reason for pursuing this broader concept is that Benjamin frequently makes reference to Jewish as well as Christian themes, especially themes derived from Christian Neoplatonism. Benjamin also frequently relies on motifs and concepts from Greek and Roman paganism. When he turns to the Bible, it is not as a pious interpreter of tradition, but as an exegetical radical, not easily subsumed under the aegis of any denomination of Christianity or Judaism. Since Benjamin does not rely on one religious tradition, but introduces concepts, themes and motifs from various European religious and religiously inspired philosophical traditions, the present study is dedicated to examining the more abstract notion of religion. By exploring how the abstract notion of the religious operates in and informs his philosophy and social theory, I am taking an approach to the concept that has not been thoroughly pursued in the secondary literature. Indeed, it is by formulating the question in a more abstract manner, by asking about the religious as such, instead of examining more concrete instantiations of the religious, that

---

[61] Cf. Kohlenbach, *Walter Benjamin: Self-reference and Religiosity*, x. I take Kohlenbach's distinction between what she terms "religion" and "religiosity" as symptomatic of her lack of clarity about her central concept. Kohlenbach writes, "My central claim is that in his writing he pursued irreducibly religious objectives and did so, moreover, independently of any existing religious institution or positive religious belief. The latter qualification explains why in my title I speak of Benjamin's religiosity rather than of his religion." According to Kohlenbach, religion seems to be the concept which refers to institutional religion and its dogma. However, as the arguments in Chapter One demonstrate, the notion that the institution of religion is to a large extent independent of a broader religious phenomenon is a misunderstanding engendered by a culturally particularistic reading that presupposes that European biblical monotheism and its social history expresses the essence of religion as such.

the question can be seen as couched within the larger problematic in historical materialism regarding the relation of the real to the ideal. In doing so, I also suggest that the over-reliance on Weber's sociology of religion in critical theory also becomes visible.

However, the drawback of examining the abstract notion of religion, and then examining this in relation to Benjamin's entire oeuvre, entails achieving a certain breadth at the expense of more depth. The present study, therefore, does not make claims to completeness. The approach taken is to examine the religious in the various domains of Benjamin's philosophy, in his epistemo-critical theory (Chapter Two), in his "linguistic" phenomenology of experience (Chapter Three) and in his manner of presenting history (Chapter Four.) The purpose is to trace how the religious informs or functions in his philosophy. Thus, in my discussion of language, in Chapter Three, for example, I make no pretensions of presenting Benjamin's theory of language in its entirety. There is little need to do this, since many excellent studies, such as those by Jacques Derrida or Paul De Man, have already appeared detailing its various aspects. Instead, my question is how the specifically religious informs his theory of language. Therefore, I will examine Benjamin's theory of language only where it relates directly to the religious. The same approach is taken with the presentation of other aspects of his philosophy.

Even here there are limits however. Tracing the intellectual history of even one religiously inspired notion in Benjamin's work, such as origin (*Ursprung*), would easily provide enough material for a study of this length. However, as I have suggested, studies of this sort are legion and are often well researched and well presented. Missing from the secondary literature is an overview, the larger picture that can help put some of these

detailed studies into a more systematic interpretive schema. For example, while I do not generally disagree with the many painstaking philological studies examining the genealogy of this or that concept in Benjamin's work, the underlying assumptions that this represents an aberration from the onto-epistemology of the Marxian dialectic, or that Benjamin was a radical amongst radicals for trying to synthesize two mutually exclusive modes of thought, is based on not adequately problematizing the theoretical context that inform these presuppositions.

The secondary literature has also shaped what aspects of the religious I choose to investigate. A large proportion of the literature dedicated to Benjamin and the religious focuses on his relationship to Judaism, the religious influence of the German Romantics, or religion in relation to aesthetics. I do not deny that Benjamin was attracted to aspects of Judaism, nor that the Romantics had a formidable influence on his views, nor that aesthetic theory is importantly related to how the notion of religion is deployed in his philosophy. However, other equally pressing relations in the context of Benjamin and the religious have not received equal attention, especially in English language scholarship. Beyond examining the concept of religion from a Durkheimian perspective, which, I believe, itself represents a novel approach to the problem of religion in Benjaminian studies, I feel that the question of Benjamin's use of religious categories in a social scientific analysis has not received the attention it merits. Most Benjamin scholars, especially in the English speaking world, work within one of the disciplines in the Humanities. Proportionally, aesthetic theorists, theorists of translation studies, and literary theorists have tended to comprise the bulk of scholarly output. With a few

notable exceptions such as the Italian editor of Benjamin's works Giorgio Agamben, the American social theorist Susan Buck-Morss, the radical anthropologist Michael Taussig, and political theorists such as Uwe Steiner, Werner Hamacher and Samuel Weber, social scientists have tended to ignore Benjamin's theories. In this context, the present study is again responding to a lacuna in the secondary literature, the absence of critical theorists of religion examining Benjamin's merger of Marx and religion.

VI – Notes on Text Selection, Language and Translations

The approach of the present analysis is to engage in a close reading of Benjamin's texts. Instead of dividing Benjamin's life into periods marked by an interest in metaphysics or materialism, or other chronological readings, I rely upon representative texts that I believe illuminate the role of the religious in his thought. I am aware of the artificiality of this approach. Benjamin's works are treated as if his thought remained almost static, de-emphasizing any intellectual development. For example, I read the "Theses on the Concept of History," which was written in 1940 together with "Capitalism as Religion," which was written much earlier, probably around 1925. However, I suggest this approach is worth pursuing, especially in light of how much of the secondary literature has tended to present his ideas as developing chronologically.

While I draw upon many of Benjamin's works, there are several pieces that are of special importance. The selection of texts is guided by the fact that I am especially interested in determining the place of the religious in relation to the philosophy that forms the basis of his social analysis and critique of Capital. This means that I rely far less on

his newspaper articles, radio addresses and other publications written in part to supplement his meager income during the 1930s. Instead, with respect to his later writings, I rely primarily on the *Arcades Project* and the "Theses on the Concept of History." With respect to his earlier writings, I look to works that explicitly develop philosophical themes, such as the infamous "Prologue" to his *Tragic Drama*. In Chapter One, Benjamin's early fragment, "Capitalism as Religion," occupies the central position, as I relate his thought to elements in Durkheim's theory of religion. In Chapter Two, in which I relate the "God-concept" in Benjamin's work to his notion of truth, I rely primarily on his early work "On the Coming Philosophy," the *Tragic Drama* as well as essays that focus on the role of experiences, such as "The Storyteller," "Karl Kraus," and his writings on Baudelaire. In Chapter Three, I investigate his theory of language, relating it to his philosophy of experience. Here I refer to the canonical texts on language, such as, "On the Language of Man and on Language as Such," "The Task of the Translator," and to a lesser degree "The Mimetic Faculty." The final chapter argues that the *Arcades Project* represents the culmination of Benjamin's entire religiously inspired phenomenology of experience of Capital in modernity. The *Arcades Project* is, above all, dominant here, but is supplemented with fragments from the "Theses on the Concept of History." Throughout, I also refer to many other works by Benjamin in order to help situate his thought.

The present study also represents an attempt to bridge the linguistic silos that have come to define, even handicap Benjaminian studies. A great deal of excellent work is being conducted almost independently in the German and English speaking realms. The

works of many leading German Benjamin researchers remain untranslated. Wiesenthal is one example of an author whose work, though excellent, is still untranslated and perhaps because of this, is absent from many English studies. By the same token, many excellent English scholars, such as Susan Buck-Morss are missing from German secondary texts. I would also suggest that English-language scholarship has not always kept pace with developments in Germany. For example, the notion of "saving," or "rescue of the phenomenon," which is a central methodological device in Benjamin's philosophy has received almost no attention in English scholarship, while it is frequently referenced in German sources. In light of this, the present study tries to put these two linguistic continents into a useful conversation with each other.

I have chosen to cite Benjamin in both German and English, since many of the English translations, excellent as they are, remain hampered, as all translations are, by the fact that certain German words do not easily lend themselves to being rendered unambiguously in English. The original German of Benjamin's citations are given in the footnotes so as not to disrupt the flow of the text. The book and page references for the location of both the English and German citations are given in parenthetical citations in the main body of this work for ease of reference. When terminology is central to the discussion this is also dealt with in the main body of the work. All the German citations come from the collected volumes of Benjamin's works *Gesammelte Schriften* and are abbreviated in the parenthetical citations as *GS*, followed by the volume number and page number. The exception to this are citations which come from the *Arcades Project*, where I follow the precedent set by the *Arcades* text as well as most secondary works on

Benjamin, where the pagination is given in square brackets without volume or page number. For English citations, I tend to rely upon the translations given in the Harvard edition of *Walter Benjamin's: Selected Writings*, abbreviated in the parentheses as simply *SW*, followed by volume and page number. The Harvard edition of Benjamin's *Selected Writings* is not complete, lacking his major opus, *Arcades Project*, his major early text, *Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, some of his early essays, as well as his copious notes and comments, all found in the German volumes. I have, therefore, supplemented the Harvard edition with John Osborne's translation of *Origin of the German Tragic Drama*,[62] Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin's translation of *Arcades Project*,[63] as well as Eiland's translation of Benjamin's early essays.[64] Occasionally, I have found the need to modify these, or to rely on alternative translations, such as those provided by Harry Zorn in *Illuminations*. I have also had to translate a few sections myself, since the *Nachlass*, Benjamin's volumes of notes, has not yet appeared in English. I will indicate in the main body of this work anytime I make modifications to the published translations, or where I provide my own translations. For sake of consistency with the English citations, I have chosen to use the English titles of Benjamin's works, preferring, say, *Origin of the German Tragic Drama* to *Ursprung des Deutschen Trauerspiel* and *Arcades Project* to *Passagen-Werk.*

---

[62] Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborn (London: Verso).
[63] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 2002).
[64] Walter Benjamin, *Early Writings 1910-1917*, trans. Howard Eiland (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 2011).

I do not provide the German or other primary source language for any of the other thinkers I rely upon. Although Kant, Hegel, Marx and Adorno are frequently cited, I do not perform a close reading of their work. My use of their philosophies is expository, rather than novel, and is predicated on a well established tradition of English language scholarship. As for the German secondary literature on Benjamin which remains un-translated into English, I tend to paraphrase rather than provide direct quotations. If needed, I provide the original German in the footnotes. All scriptural references come from the New Revised Standard Version of the Holy Bible, which, while less eloquent than the King James version, is regarded by scholars of Christianity as the least doctrinally specific edition and therefore most suitable for academic use. Lastly, I have chosen to provide all citations not directly from Benjamin's oeuvre in the footnotes for ease of reading.

Chapter One – Mammon Rising: A First Sketch of Benjamin's Anthropological Materialist Theory of Religion in Modernity

Benjamin already suggests that modernity remains bound to the religious in the 1925 fragment "Capitalism as Religion," (*SW1*, 288; *GS4*, 100.) This text furnishes clues as to how the religious can be situated within Benjamin's larger oeuvre, and as such provides an excellent starting point for the investigation into the role of religion in Benjamin's work. Contrary to the standard exegesis, I maintain that in the "Capitalism" fragment, Benjamin explicitly distances himself from a Weberian theory of religion and, more specifically, that Benjamin's work resists a Weberian inspired Marxist reading of the role of the religious. Instead, I argue that a determination of the concept of religion espoused by Durkheim, the other founder of the sociology and anthropology of religion, provides a more helpful paradigm through which to interpret Benjamin's critical theory. I suggest that on the question of religion we read Benjamin along a "Durkheimian-Marxian axis" rather than a "Weberian-Marxian" one.

Reading Benjamin on religion through a "Durkheimian lens" can mitigate some of the tensions that purportedly exist between Benjamin's commitment to a materialist ontology on the one hand and his commitment to a religious metaphysic on the other. In light of Durkheim's theory of religion, the "Capitalism" fragment proves to be a significant departure from how the religious often tends to be interpreted in Benjamin's work. Weber's theories of religion have become the hegemonic paradigm through which to understand the phenomenon, and represent a dominant tendency in the secondary

literature devoted to Benjamin's incorporation of the religious.[65] Benjamin's texts evince compelling correspondences to Durkheim's theories on religion. Despite this fact, the affinities between Benjamin's and Durkheim's theories has received comparatively little attention in the scholarly literature. By reading Benjamin with Durkheim on religion, Benjamin's thought can be repatriated within a (non-Weberian but nonetheless Marxian-) materialist paradigm without overt violence to his theory. In doing so, we approach what in the "Surrealism," essay, and in the *Arcades Project* Benjamin referres to as an "anthropological materialism" (*Anthropologisches Materialismus*) (*SW2*, 209; *GS2*, 297; [Also see: U12,4; W8,1; a1,1; p2,4; p2a,1.])[66] In what follows I suggest that this anthropological materialist theory of religion points towards approaches to religion that overcome the reductive dualisms generally posited as self-evident. By following Durkheim on religion we may come to agree with Adorno's ostensibly paradoxical insight, that, albeit quoted here slightly out of context, "At its most materialistic, materialism comes to agree with theology."[67]

In what follows I am not suggesting that Benjamin is a Durkheimian theorist.[68] Rather, I maintain there are useful correspondences, "elective affinities" as it were,

---

[65] See for example, Samuel Weber, *Benjamin's –abilities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); Michael Löwey, "Capitalism as Religion: Walter Benjamin and Max Weber," *Historical Materialism* 17, (2009): 60-73.

[66] Noteworthy is that Benjamin places anthropological materialism in a constellation with religion.

[67] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 207.

[68] See Schöttker, "Erinnern," 277. Benjamin's biography indicates that he may very well have been influenced by a Durkheimian conception of the religious. One suggestive biographical instance in this regard is his association with Georges Bataille and his attendance at Bataille's *Collége de Sociologie*. Bataille, it will be recalled was a student

between Durkheim's theory and Benjamin's overall project. It will not do, however, to downplay unduly any influence Weber might have had on Benjamin's intellectual formation. After all, Benjamin cites Weber in the "Capitalism" fragment, and as Uwe Steiner convincingly demonstrates, Weber influenced Benjamin's "Dialog on the Religiosity of the Present" (*Early Writings*, 62-84; *GS2*, 16-34.) Concepts clearly inherited from Weberian sociology find their way into many of Benjamin's major works. His notion of "homogeneous empty time," for example, which Benjamin already hints at in his *Tragic Drama* , seems at least in part indebted to Weber's arguments in the *Protestant Ethic* regarding the de-spiritualization of the cosmos. It is also a matter of historical record that Bloch, whom some Benjaminian exegetes cite as having been a formidable influence, was Weber's student and frequently attended his reading group. Weber's in-house seminars were also attended by Lukacs, whose influence on Benjamin can hardly be overstated. Indeed, it would be difficult to imagine that the giant and founder of sociology did not have a considerable impact on Benjamin's own philosophy.[69]

---

of Durkheim's nephew and occasional co-author Marcel Mauss. Mauss had elaborated on Durkheim's theory of the sacred, which became a focal issue for Bataille and the members of the *Collége*. In 1973, Bataille published his own work on religion entitled, appropriately enough, *Theory of Religion*, which espouses a theory of religion that builds on Durkheim's. Another significant connection with Durkheim is noted by Detlev Schöttker, who detects an influence of Halbwachs in Benjamin's writings. Halbwachs was engaged in combining the phenomenological insights of Henri Bergson with the structural sociology of Durkheim.

[69] For a more complete discussion of Weber's in-house seminars, see, Löwy, "Figures of Weberian Marxism."

Nonetheless, if the inquiry is circumscribed by the question of religion in Benjamin's work, a Durkheimian concept is more useful for theorizing with Benjamin than Weber's concept of the religious. Specifically Benjamin seems to echo two central conclusions of Durkheim's theory of religion which Weber's would deny: (i) Benjamin regards modernity as remaining fundamentally structured by the religious, and (ii) that this "new" religion of modernity is defined primarily by praxis rather than dogma.

Perhaps part of the reason why Durkheim has not been placed in a constellation with Benjamin's thought is the fact that, as Anne Wakefield Rawls suggests, Durkheim has consistently been misconstrued as a positivist.[70] Even careful readers from divergent theoretical perspectives, such as Adorno and John Milbank, place Durkheim into this tradition.[71] That Adorno regards Durkheim as a positivist is noteworthy since it is from Adorno and his students Rolf Tiedemann, and the aforementioned Schwepenäuser and Habermas that we first inherited many of Benjamin's posthumously published texts, and to whom we are indebted for a wealth of significant early studies of Benjamin's thought, which, of course, shaped the discourse that followed. Perhaps some Adornian biases have remained in the Benjamin reception? It will be remembered, of course, that like Benjamin himself, Adorno and the researchers of the Frankfurt School militated against positivist social theory, their efforts eventually culminating in *Der Positivismusstreit*.

---

[70] Anne Warfield Rawls, *Epistemology and Practice : Durkheim's The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 5.

[71] See for example, Adorno, *Negative*, 326, "*Among the positivists it was Emile Durkheim's* doctrine of collective spirit [...]" (emphasis added); John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 51.

However, as Rawls demonstrates, interpreting Durkheim as a positivist is a misreading, although one admittedly attributable to the convoluted manner in which Durkheim himself presents his information. His arguments, especially on religion, are often obscured by massive amounts of field data. An indication of Durkheim's ostensible positivism, so Rawls, is evinced by his explicit insistence that religion is fit to be investigated "scientifically" because it rests on measurable "social facts," such as "moral forces."[72] The seemingly uncritical acceptance of the Newtonian paradigm as also applicable to a social scientific investigation has appeared too reductive for many theorists to accept. However, "The emphasis on social facts, generally interpreted as positivist, changes its character when it is understood that for Durkheim the recognizability and validity of social facts are produced only in and through participation in social practices."[73] This changed character of social facts becomes clearer in the light of Durkheim's epistemology. According to Rawls, Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms* is a careful analysis of religion and, at the same time, an epistemic theory intended to account for the origins of human reason, which Durkheim claims is inextricably linked to the formation and constant re-generation of the social. In light of Rawls' convincing analysis, my own investigation into Durkheim's theory of religion will explore this epistemic component, which, I will argue, helps bridge the gap between Benjamin's "materialism" and his "metaphysics."

---

[72] Rawls, *Epistemology and Practice,* 5.
[73] Ibid., 5-6.

Durkheim's thought, far from being positivist, can be read as representing a fruitful summation and important development of the Young Hegelians' *Religionskritik.* Perhaps alone for this reason, we can hear echoes of Durkheim's ideas in Benjamin's work, since like Durkheim, Benjamin was an assiduous reader of German philosophy. Penning a treatise on religion was something of a right of passage for continental European philosophers throughout the 18th and 19th century, which continued even into the early years of the 20th century. It was the Young Left Hegelians, Arnold Rüge, Bruno Bauer, as well as Feuerbach, and Marx, however, who moved the discussion of religion from the realm of rational theology to something resembling a modern sociology of religion, by advancing strictly materialist theories. Feuerbach, in his *Essence of Christianity*, for example, holds that religion consists of the central characteristics of an idealized self-conception of the community, cathected and projected onto an anthropomorphic image: God as humanity's self-alienation. Durkheim's theory of religion evinces affinities with the Feuerbachian thesis and with the ideas of the other Young Hegelians more generally. Like Feuerbach, Durkheim regards the social as saturated with religion, and, like Feuerbach, Durkheim attempts to account for religion immanently, without recourse to the mystical or the transcendent. However, like Weber, Durkheim also develops his theory of religion as a critique of reductive materialisms, which understand religion to be simply a reflection of the economic base, or a mystification of social relationships, a lineage of thought which also has its roots in the critiques of the Young Left Hegelians. In his essay, "Marxism and Sociology: The Materialist Conception of History," Durkheim underscores his critique of reductive

materialisms, echoing in important respects Marx's comments in *A Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, arguing that:

> Psycho-physiology, after having pointed to the organic substratum as the foundation of psychical life, has often committed the error of denying all reality to the latter. From this arose the theory which reduces consciousness to being a mere epiphenomenon. What has been lost to sight is that if representations depend originally upon organic states, once they are constituted, they are, by virtue of these realities sui generis, autonomous and capable of being causes in their turn, producing new phenomena.[74]

Durkheim systematizes the speculations of the Young Left Hegelians and attempts to support them with empirical data. He also contributes a significant new methodological insight that effectively amounts to a "Copernican turn" in the study of religion: this recognition consists in understanding that the social is a dimension of human life irreducible to the actions of individuals who comprise that social. Durkheim's Copernican turn will help to resolve the reductive oppositions that have come to define the reception of Benjamin on the question of the religious. However, before elaborating Durkheim's central insights, let us examine the evidence that might suggest that Benjamin is closer to Durkheim than Weber when it comes to his conception of religion.

---

[74] Émile Durkheim, "Marxism and Sociology: The Materialist Conception of History," in *The Rules of Sociological Method*, ed. Steven Lukes, trans. W. D. Halls (New York: Free Press, 1982), 174.

I – "Capitalism as Religion" as a Durkheimian Text

Despite the brevity of "Capitalism as Religion," Benjamin indicates that his notion of religion to be fundamentally at odds with Weber's conclusion in the *Protestant Ethic* no less than three times. Benjamin exegetes, who have glossed this text, have inevitably highlighted Benjamin's supposed closeness to Weber, citing the following reference to Weber as evidence: "The proof of the religious structure of capitalism – not merely, as Weber believes, as a formation conditioned by religion, but as an essentially religious phenomenon [...]" (*SW1*, 288; *GS4*, 100.)[75] Reading this passage, Samuel Weber, for example, claims that, "In one of the very few references in his writings to Max Weber, *Benjamin asserts the need to go further* than the author of the *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* in determining the significance of religion, and in particular of Christianity, for the socioeconomic system that dominates the modern period."[76] A more cautious but similar formulation is advanced by Löwy who writes, "Benjamin's fragment is clearly inspired by Max Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. [...] However, as we shall see, *Benjamin's argument goes well beyond Weber* [....]"[77] What Samuel Weber, Löwy and others who have glossed this text suggest, is what I will term an "intensification" of the Weberian conclusion. In this reading Benjamin's similarity to Weber's thought is highlighted, with the difference in their views on religion being reduced to one of degree, or intensity. However, at the very point in the fragment where

---

[75] "*Der Nachweis dieser reliösen Struktur des Kapitalismus, nicht nur, wie Weber meint, als eines religiös bedingten Gebildes, sondern als einer essentiell religiösen Erscheinung* [....]"

[76] Weber, *Benjamin's –abilities*, 251.

[77] Löwey, "Capitalism as Religion: Walter Benjamin and Max Weber," 61.

Benjamin mentions Weber, at the very moment when he seems to articulate a theory of religion that simply heightens Weber's conclusion, Benjamin is actually signaling his disavowal.

It will be remembered that in *The Protestant Ethic*, Weber suggests that the Lutheran notion of the call, together with the Calvinist doctrine of predestination, were some of the ideational factors instrumental in changing the Medieval European mindscape to permit Capital to overcome the inertia typical of pre-modern societies.[78] Lutheran and Calvinist doctrinal innovations, Weber argues, inverted the Medieval Catholic understanding of work and wealth. Medieval theologians tended to interpret Genesis 4 to indicate that humanity's need to labour for life's necessities was a sign of damnation, a consequence of the first humans having disobeyed God's command not to eat of the tree of knowledge (of good and evil.) Individual poverty, in the spirit of *imitatio Christi*, by contrast was regarded as a sign of grace. The Protestant theological concepts of the call and predestination inverted this traditional interpretation. Eventually, wealth was considered an indication of God's favour and poverty was proof of lack of grace. This reversal occurred, Weber argues, because the doctrine of predestination suggests that God has already chosen who will win heaven in the afterlife (the elect) and who will be damned to hell. Calvin himself actually counseled his followers not to question on which side of the great divide they might find themselves. However, Weber notes that this state

---

[78] See, Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Dover Publications, 2003).

of indeterminacy in matters of utmost spiritual importance was psychologically speaking insufferable.

In response to the psychological pressure that arose from the doctrine of predestination, Calvinist pastors responsible for the laity's spiritual care reasoned that perhaps one's status as elect or damned could be glimpsed in this world, following a re-interpretation of the Gospel of Matthew, "Ye shall know them by their fruits."[79] God, it was thought, showers His chosen with earthly gifts. The curious consequence of the theological doctrine of predestination, so Weber argues, was that individuals worked hard, harder than was necessary to provide for their immediate needs, in order to allay their anxiety and prove to themselves and their community that they were destined for paradise. Weber claims that the belief in predestination helped to create a dynamic social process which paved the way for Capital to take root.

However, in the final analysis, Weber maintains that although there were "elective affinities" between Protestant theologies and Capital's economic behavioral dictates, in essence, modernity should be understood as being no longer religious. Although at its inception Capital "needs" Protestantism to discipline the pre-modern, once people begin to enjoy their money, the connection to the religious is severed. Weber suggests that with technical mastery over nature comes a general decline in religious adherence, and, by extension a decline in religious experience. In its primordial origins, Capital was deeply related to the religious, but in modernity, Capital is a secular endeavor: the world has become "rationalized," and therefore "de-spiritualized."

---

[79] Mt. 7:16

It is this conclusion of Weber's *Protestant Ethic* that Benjamin rejects. As quoted above, Benjamin maintains that modern Capital continues to express an essentially religious character. He states that, "A religion may be discerned in capitalism [...]" (*SW1*, 288; *GS4*, 100)[80] and again near the end, "The Christianity of the Reformation period did not favor the growth of capitalism; instead it transformed itself into capitalism" (*SW1*, 290; *GS4*, 102.)[81] Benjamin clearly states repeatedly that Capital is not simply indebted to religion, or shares trace elements with the religious, but that it is itself a religion. This is not an "intensification" of the Weberian conclusion but its rejection. Caygill agrees when he notes that, "The Christianity of the reformation period did not favour the development of capitalism, but transformed itself into capitalism. *The corollary of Christianity becoming capitalism is that capitalism becomes a religion* [...]"(emphasis added.)[82] Benjamin argues that modernity is religious and that this new religion is Capital.

However, Benjamin's assertion that modernity remains religious, and further, that this "religion" is itself a mode of economic organization, seems, to put it mildly, an exaggerated claim. A central tenet of the narrative of modernity, derived, in part, from Weber's analysis, is that religion as an over-arching system of meaning declined and eventually collapsed over the course of the 16th to the 20th centuries. According to modernity's secularization-narrative, Christianity once informed everything from

---

[80] "*Im Kapitalismus ist eine Religion zu erblicken* [....]"
[81] *Das Christentum zur Reformationszeit hat nicht das Aufkommen des Kapitalismus begünstigt, sondern es hat sich in den Kapitalismus umgewandelt.*"
[82] Howard Caygill, *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience* (New York, New York: Routledge, 1998), 56.

philosophy and politics to social hierarchies, domestic relationships and even abstract notions of time and space. Weber does show convincingly that with the rise of Lutheranism, Calvinism and other protestant reformation movements that immediately preceded or were to some extent synchronic with the advent of Capital, the nation state, and the industrial revolution, Christianity ceased to provide the cover of meaning it once had. Weber's conclusion which underwrites the secularization thesis, holds that people in modernity and modern culture itself are no longer religious.

It is important to note, however, as Charles Taylor demonstrates in *A Secular Age* that in actuality, secularism can have a number of differing definitions. Taylor describes at least three versions of secularism: (i) Secularism as public spaces emptied of religion – the separation of "Church and State"; (ii) secularism as referencing a certain religious pluralism where Christianity no longer serves as the only normative symbolic code; (iii) as a "falling off of religious belief and practice, in people turning away from God [....]"[83] Taylor's first two definitions are not at issue here. Instead, I will restrict my inquiry to discussing the third definition of secularism, the falling off from religion, or as Marx, Comte and others argue, that society's *telos* is a-religious. This third definition is what I will refer to in the remainder of this discussion as the "strong version of the secularization-thesis." While the legal separation of Church and State can be clearly traced, we can ask with Claude Lefort, whether eradicating the symbolic dimension of the

[83] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 2-3.

religious is at all possible.[84] Denying the continuation of the symbolic dimension of the religious is what is entailed in the strong version of secularism. It is this strong version that I argue informs the resistance to Benjamin's inclusion of religious motifs in his "materialism," and it is the strong secularization-thesis that can be problematized effectively from the Durkheimian perspective, thereby opening the door to Benjamin's claim that Capital is, in fact, a religion.

The strong version of the secularization-thesis suggests that the collapse of Christianity as Europe's psycho-social taxonomic system was hastened by the rise of the new modes of knowing embodied by the experimental sciences. The archetype of the new man was Newton.[85] With the advent of science, religion lost its prominence in the world. Why would anyone want to believe that the Earth was the centre of the solar system, when the evidence was incontrovertible that this was not the case? Why would anyone hold on to the notion that Adam and Eve were the first human beings, placed on Earth by a benevolent God when, at least after Charles Darwin, it could be shown beyond a reasonable doubt that humans evolved from less complex organisms? The rise of critical Biblical scholarship in the 18th and 19th centuries also played its role in dethroning Christian dogma. The Bible, it could now be shown, had been written by human beings

---

[84] Claude Lefort, "Permanence of the Political-Theological?" in *Democracy and Political Theory*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), 222.

[85] This claim needs to be restricted to Newton as a symbol of the modern scientist. The historical Newton was preoccupied with Christian theology, writing more on the mysteries of the Bible than on the science of nature. Indeed, the distance separating the historical Newton from the revisionist Newton of liberal history itself gestures towards the ideological nature of the secularization-thesis. This fact will have relevance for our subsequent arguments.

after all, and what was more, there were many editorial changes, resulting in differing versions of the "divine word." According to the secularization narrative to which Weber's thesis tends to lend its support, Christianity was past its usefulness. In modernity religion is relegated to the private sphere, a medieval vestige desperately clung to by those who can not find a place in the new world. As Voltaire mused, perhaps Christianity could provide a simplistic morality, especially for the illiterate. More often than not, however, it is the last strong-hold of those who are pathologically anti-intellectual and who, perhaps out of spite, deliberately choose irrationality over the new reason.

At least by the 21st century, it seemed as though religion had completely vacated Europe's public sphere. Although it made some appearances in political and social discourse, around issues such as pacifist objections to war, prohibition, or charity, it no longer held court as it once had. Questions once relegated to the religious, perhaps because as Hegel suggests,[86] they could not be answered in any other way, were now tackled by the natural sciences, whose explanatory model(s) proved far more effective. Politics and economics also encroached on Christianity's "imagined communities," replacing religious affiliation with national, ethnic and class identities. Christianity's one remaining bastion, morality, was secularized and codified as human rights. In short, no one believed anymore. How then could Benjamin's suggestion be even remotely

---

[86] See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977). In much of the text God functions as a place holder for the unknown. (This holds true until the end of the argument when God is recognized as "the Absolute.")

plausible that modern Europe under Capital could be described as fundamentally religious?

There are indeed aspects of the secularization narrative that cannot be denied. In modernity the form of European society did indeed undergo significant changes with respect to the legal status of religion in the public sphere. Habermas summarized these structural transformations when he noted that, "The status of the Church changed as a result of the Reformation; the anchoring in divine authority that it represented – that is religion – became a private matter. The so-called freedom of religion historically secured the first sphere of private autonomy [....]"[87] However, the conclusions Weber draws from the changes that occurred with respect to the legal status of Christianity during the course of European modernity, depend to a great extent on how the concept of religion is itself defined. Marcel Gauchet, for example, challenges Weber's conclusion by suggesting that modernity is not so much less religious as it is less superstitious, thereby problematizing the concept of religion itself.[88] Similarly Lefort warns that:

> [...] it would be quite illegitimate to leap to the conclusion that religion as such must disappear or, to be more accurate, that it must be confined to the realm of personal opinion. How, in fact, could we argue that, without losing all sense of its

---

[87] Jürgen Habermas, *Structural Transformations of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1989), 11 – 12.

[88] Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion*, trans. Oscar Burge (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

symbolic dimension, of the dimension that constitutes the relations human beings establish with the world?[89]

If the essence of religion is to be found in its etiology,[90] in the literal belief in a pseudo-scientific *Weltanschauung*, then Weber and the other proponents of the strong version of the secularization-thesis are no doubt correct. It is likely true that in modernity fewer people believe in the literal truth of the Genesis creation stories than in pre-modernity.[91] However, as Terry Eagelton quips, "believing that religion is a botched attempt to explain the world [...] is like seeing ballet as a botched attempt to run for a bus."[92] Which is simply to say that perhaps there is another way of defining religion other than emphasizing literal belief in its cosmology and creation myths. The truth of religion is not necessarily to be equated with the literal truth of its etiology. If the essence of religion is uncoupled from belief, especially literal belief in religion's cosmology and

---

[89] Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, 222.

[90] Etiology is generally defined as the study of causation. For our purposes, the term will refer to religious "myths" or stories that attempt to account for creation, or that provide origin narratives for various aspects of the world as it now exists.

[91] Cf. Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, trans. John and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976.) As Ginsberg's arguments suggest, even this claim is contestable. Ginzburg examines the inquisitorial records of the Italian town of Montereale near Pordenone. Specifically, he investigates the trial of a 15th century miller, Menocchio, whose heretical views landed him in the inquisitorial court. What Ginzburg discovers is that there is little evidence to suggests that a Christian ideological hegemony dominated the imaginary of the lower orders. While the political and religious elites may indeed have been steeped in Christian dogma, those working in the towns and country-side espoused extremely original and in a Christian context, heretical views, infused by vestiges of ancient paganism and local folk lore. This fact is not to be seen as a contradiction of Durkheim's claim that the religious saturates the social, since the lower orders were steeped in a different religion than the elites, and were not therefore non-religious.

[92] Terry Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 50.

etiology, then Weber's conclusion that modernity is de-spiritualized because it has been rationalized is less certain, and Benjamin's claim becomes more plausible. Durkheim, as I will show, provides precisely such a re-conceptualization of the religious.

The difference between Weber's and Durkheim's theory of religion is based on a fundamental disagreement about the status of belief in defining the concept of religion as such. Weber's original thesis was that there exits a relationship of "elective affinity" between the belief in the theologies of Protestant "sects" emerging in Europe at the dawn of modernity and the economic discipline necessary for Capital to take hold and thrive. In some respects the *Protestant Ethic* was Weber's rebuke of the mechanical materialist social theory. At least in one respect, the *Protestant Ethic* was intended to be a corrective to the mechanistic explanations of cultural phenomena Weber found articulated in some Marxian theories.[93] Part of Weber's object of critique is the overly reductive base-superstructure metaphor, which he is at pains to prove unsuitable for sociological analysis. While Weber would not deny the importance of "material conditions" (base) as one of many causal vectors that helped Capital become Europe's dominant economic mode of production, he will claim that the inclusion of ideational factors (superstructure) is necessary for a comprehensive and robust theory of culture. *The Protestant Ethic*, therefore, represents Weber's attempt to introduce the ideational content as a co-contributing condition necessary for theorizing the emergence of Capital. In making this argument, Weber implicitly posits that religion, here Protestant Christianity, is in essence

[93] Löwy, "Weber Against Marx?: The Polemic with Historical Materialism in the Protestant Ethic."

a belief system. Only if the religious is construed along the axis of belief, does Weber's larger project cohere, which is to demonstrate that beliefs, or more generally, ideational content represent data that need to be included when theorizing the social. Only because religion is a manifestation of the superstructure *par excellence*, can Weber make a case against the reductive Marxisms that attempt to explain culture mechanistically.

It is of course true that Weber's definition of the essence of religion is not restricted to its ideational content. Nonetheless, in valuing all the elements that are generally recognized to constitute the religious – ritual, material culture, narratives and dogma – belief in the ideational content remains, for Weber, its central defining mark. Durkheim, like Weber also recognizes that religion is a complex phenomenon made up of various components. However, in determining the central feature of the religious, Durkheim argues that ritual and not belief, should be recognized as constituting the core of the concept. While Weber argues religion is something to be believed, for Durkheim religion is something that people do. This seemingly superficial disagreement between Weber and Durkheim on whether to place the emphasis of the definition of religion on belief or on ritual results in two radically different conclusions. Whereas Weber sees the decline in the literal belief in Christian dogma as a sign of the slow domestication, privatization and eventual eradication of the religious from the social, Durkheim concludes that modernity, even "secular" post-industrial European modernity under Capital, remains fundamentally religious. Durkheim interprets the decline in literal beliefs not as an indication of the eradication of religion, but rather as a *change in form* of

the religious. Similarly, in the fragment "Capitalism as Religion," Benjamin claims that modernity is not post-religious as Weber suggests, but rather, as maintains Durkheim, continues to be infused by the religious.

One can hear echoes of Durkheim's point in one of Benjamin's earliest essay entitled, "Dialogue on Contemporary Religiosity," (*Early Writings*, 62-84; *GS2*, 16-34.)[94] At first Benjamin seems to support the typical Weberian thesis that, "Over the last couple of hundred years the old religions, have for us, become infirm," and as a result, "[...] we're in a religious crisis" (*Early Writings*, 65; *GS2*, 20.)[95] Benjamin, however, suggests a position closer to Durkheim's when he claims that in modernity there are signs that a new religion (*neue Religion*) is becoming visible (*Early Writings*, 72; *GS2*, 26.) With respect to Socialism, he even suggests that perhaps this is the "Heroic age of a new religion" (*Early Writings*, 72; *GS2*, 26.)[96]

However, the problem for Benjamin is that in modernity, the question is not asked as to what the religiosity of the day might be, but rather, whether "one of the historical religions can still find accommodation in the present, no matter if its arms and legs are cut

---

[94] For a full discussion see, Uwe Steiner, "Early Writings, 1914 – 18," in *Walter Benjamin* trans. Michael Winkler (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004.) With respect to the early phase of Benjamin's writing that this essay represents, Steiner warns that, "It is often an all too easy ploy, and it is always tempting, to find evidence that a thinker's earliest writings foreshadow all of his later ideas." However, I agree with Steiner when he notes that in the case of "*Dialog über die Religiosität der Gegenwart*," this strategy is actually justified since aspects of Benjamin's later thoughts come to the fore, albeit in embryonic form.

[95] "*Für uns sind in den letzten Jarhunderten die alten Religionen geborsten*," "[...] *wir sind in einer religiösen Krise.*"

[96] The German sentences in context read: "*Jedenfalls erkenne ich in dieser Bewegung Anfänge. Meinentwegen die Heroenzeit einer neuen Religion.*"

off, and its head as well" (*Early Writings*, 78-79; *GS2*, 34.)[97] In order to determine whether the changes that occurred in modernity with respect to religion indicate, as Weber argues, the disappearance of religion or rather demonstrate as Durkheim and Benjamin intimate, the emergence of a new religiosity, it is necessary to pause and to elaborate the difference in Weber's and Durkheim's definition of the concept, especially in relation to belief. In order to put the differences in their theories of religion in high relief, it will be necessary to both determine the concept as a universal and also to "fill in" the concept, to make it concrete by incorporating empirical data.

II – Defining the Religion: The Problem

Part of the problem in defining religion as a universal is endemic to the project of determining any general concept. However, in the case of religion, the complexity of the task is intensified due to its variegated history, multitudinous manifestations and often contradictory ideational content. Hegel noted this complexity when he maintained that he only felt ready to broach the subject of religion towards the end of his life; one assumes he means after such comparatively "simple" projects as the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and the *Logic* had been completed. Similarly, the byzantine nature of the concept led Weber to begin both his *Protestant Ethic* as well as *The Sociology of Religion*, with the caution

---

[97] "[...] *eine der historischen Religionen in ihr noch Unterkunft finden könne, und wenn man ihr Arme und Beine abschnitte und den Kopf dazu.*" The full quote reads, "And this most modern problem, of which the papers are full, results, because one does not ask [...] after the religion of the times; but rather one asks if one of the old historical religions in [modernity] could still find a home, even if its arms and legs were cut off, and its head as well."

that a definition of religion can only be ventured after a long and careful study of it has been completed. Durkheim echoes this same warning in *The Elementary Forms*.

Despite the opacity of the concept that these and other theorists identify, outside of the discipline of religious studies and the sociology of religion, the concept is often treated as straightforward and unproblematic in a significant portion of contemporary scholarship. Unfortunately, Benjaminian scholarship is no exception to this trend. I suggest that in the Benjamin reception the concept of religion in particular tends to remain an indeterminate abstraction. The problem is analogous to one pointed out by Marx in his critique of Thomas Malthus's use of the concept "population" in political economy. Marx argued that:

> It seems correct to begin with the real and the concrete, with the real precondition, thus to begin, in economics with e.g. the population, which is the foundation and the subject of the entire social act of production. However, on closer examination this proves false. The population is an abstraction if I leave out, for example, the classes of which it is composed. These classes in turn are an empty phrase if I am not familiar with the elements on which they rest. E.g. wage labour, capital, etc.[98]

The same point can be made about religion. Religion seems like a self-evident starting point, but it remains an abstraction, if the socio-historical context that shapes the

---

[98] Marx, *Grundrisse*, 100. Cf. Horkheimer, "Authority and the Family," in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, 69. Horkheimer makes a similar point with respect to defining the notion of authority in the abstract: "A general definition of authority would necessarily be almost empty of content, but this is true of all definitions which attempt to capture elements of social life in a way that would be valid for all of history."

phenomenon is left un-theorized. Durkheim notes this problem in his *Rules of the Sociological Method*, where he writes:

> However obvious and important this rule [of defining concepts] is, it is scarcely observed at present in sociology. Precisely because sociology deals with things which are constantly on our lips, such as the family, property, crime, etc., very often it appears useless to the sociologist initially to ascribe a rigorous definition to them.[99]

As I have suggested, most readers of Benjamin interested in his understanding of the religious do not heed the warnings of Marx and Durkheim, and for that matter, Socrates. Instead, these theorists tend to implicitly follow Weber in assuming that belief comprises the essence of religion. In doing so, they fail to recognize, as Durkheim shows, that "belief-based" definitions of religion cannot provide a foundation for religion as a universal, and that this fact, in turn, might suggest a problem with how the concept itself is construed.

Ideally, religion, as a universal concept should manage to subsume all actually existing religions with all their essential qualities. That is, the concept as general and universal should not be delimited so that in actually it only refers to Christianity, ethical monotheism, clericalism, dogma or some other subset of the general notion. However, it has proven to be a daunting challenge to find the definable essence that is assumed to lie at the core of all religions, an essence that could, for instance, legitimize the classification

---

[99] Émile Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, ed. Steven Lukes, trans. W. D. Halls (London: The MacMillian Press , 1982), 76.

under one notion of both Theravada Buddhism as practiced in Northern India around 300 BCE and Thomist theology that flourished in parts of Europe before the Protestant Reformation. The approach of defining religion as a universal according to an underlying similarity in the dogmatic belief structures of these traditions is liable to fail because the belief-systems espouse mutually exclusive validity claims. In Theravada Buddhism, for example, gods are thought not to have any actual existence and are consequently not worshiped. In Medieval Catholicism, by contrast, the confession of faith in the one true God and His incarnation is the very criteria for being religious.[100] Not only are Theravada Buddhism and Roman Catholicism such divergent traditions that it is tempting to classify them as totally unrelated phenomena, but as Antonio Gramsci notes, even a single religious tradition is irreconcilably internally differentiated along, for example, class and gender lines. "Every religion, even Catholicism [...] is in reality a multiplicity of distinct and often contradictory religions: there is one Catholicism for the peasants, one for the petit-bourgeois and town workers, one for women, and one for intellectuals which is itself variegated and disconnected."[101]

The problem with these approaches, as Durkheim sees it, is that definitions of religion that emphasize belief attempt to express the nature of religion as a whole.[102] Pursuing this strategy tends to produce contradictory definitions since the whole

---

[100] See, for example, Augustine, "Of True Religion," in *Augustine: Earlier Writings,* ed. John H. S. Burleigh (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press), 218.
[101] Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. by Quintin Hare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 420.
[102] Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (New York: Free Press, 1965), 51.

conceived from the vantage point of beliefs is internally divided. Recognizing that despite these problems religion is nonetheless generally defined according to its belief system, Durkheim in *The Elementary Forms* launches his study into the "objective content of religion," by demonstrating that belief-based definitions fail to account for religion in its universality. Durkheim's gambit is that if he can show that typical belief-based definitions do not, in fact, define the phenomenon, but instead illegitimately generalize a particular instance of the general notion (*differentia*), then he can demonstrate that there is a problem with how the religious itself is conceived and that the concept is in need of re-formulation. To accomplish his task, Durkheim focuses on two standard versions of belief-based definitions proposed by modern (typically European) theorists. One suggests that religion consists in the belief in the supernatural, while the second argues that religion is best conceived of as a belief in god(s).

III – The Failure of Belief-Based Definitions of Religion

Durkheim cites the sociologists Spencer and Max Müller as proponents of the view that religion in its essence has to do with the supernatural.[103] The fact that this is a fairly common determination of the concept is evinced by Johann Gottlieb Fichte, who already in 1792 wrote, "All founders of religions have appealed for proof of the truth of their doctrines not to the determination of our reason, nor to theoretical proofs, but rather to a *supernatural authority and have required belief in this as the only legitimate way to*

[103] Ibid., 39.

conviction"[104] (emphasis added.) Durkheim highlights the problem with this position by pointing out that the idea of the supernatural is a relatively late arrival in the history of thought. It therefore cannot serve as a definition of the essence of religion since it does not articulate that which is common to all its essential manifestations. The supernatural is a modern concept. It implies its opposite, the natural, and that is predicated on a modern scientific paradigm. In the Newtonian "clock-work" universe, nature is thought to be governed by immutable laws. Only when nature is conceived as being regulated in this way, can a notion of the supernatural emerge. For most, if not all, pre-modern imaginaries the opposition between natural and supernatural cannot arise. That is to say, before science is elevated into a culture's meta-discourse, everything that happens is construed as "natural," or better, everything that happens does so "supernaturally." "That is why," Durkheim notes, "the miraculous interventions which the ancients attributed to their gods were not to their eyes miracles in the modern acceptation of the term."[105] These "miracles" were simply more spectacular and less frequent manifestations of the ever-present "supernatural."

Another problem with this conception of the religious is that the notion of the supernatural places the accent of the definition on the unexpected. Yet, religion is not meant to account for the exceptional, the "miracles." Rather, for Durkheim, religion is the horizon within which the normal routinized activities of life accrue meaning: the

---

[104] Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation*, trans. Garrett Green (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 80.
[105] Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms*, 41.

movement of the stars, the yearly harvest, coming of age, birth and death.[106] Also, notes Durkheim, even when a notion of mystery or the supernatural is a conspicuous marker of a given religion's dogmatic content, as in Christianity for example, it nonetheless can vary in significance throughout time. The emphasis on mystery has come to the fore, but has also receded far into the background of Christian theology, depending on the historical period and the Christian tradition in question.[107] If religion is to express the trans-cultural and trans-historical dimension that universal concepts strive to articulate, then it cannot be defined as being primarily constituted by a relationship with the supernatural.

The second version of the belief-based definition of the essence of religion rejected by Durkheim is the claim that religion is primarily defined by a notion of divinity.[108] Although I read Hegel's fully developed theory of religion as more nuanced than the following passage might suggest, his determination of the general concept is instructive of how the notion of a divinity is often regarded as central to religion. Hegel writes, "religion is the relation of human consciousness to God."[109] Again, however, the empirical evidence provided by the existence of various religious traditions suggests that this conception too is fallacious. As mentioned above, Theravada Buddhism does not regard divinity as central to its dogma. Although it is true, as Durkheim admits, that

---

[106] Ibid., 43.
[107] See, for example, Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).
[108] Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms*, 44.
[109] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion: The Lectures of 1827*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson, trans. R F. Brown, P. C. Hodgson and J. M. Stewart (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 76.

some later incarnations of Buddhism, for example Pure Land Buddhism in Japan, worship the Buddha as if he were a god, the existence of such groups does not invalidate the main claim, which is that some versions of Buddhism do not worship or even believe in gods. Perhaps if Theravada Buddhism were the only example of a religion without gods it could be dismissed as the exception that proves the rule. However, it is not the only tradition that denies ontological status to divinity. Certain versions of Jainism too, Durkheim notes, provide further examples of religious traditions without gods. It could be argued that scholastic Taoism fits this category as well. The totemic religions of various Australian aboriginal tribes that form the focal point of Durkheim's ethnographic analysis are also examples of traditions that are "foreign to all idea of divinity [....]"[110] In short, since there exist religious traditions that do without gods, a notion of divinity cannot be made the definitional criterion of the religious.

There is, however, another strategy that proponents of "divinity-centric" versions of the religious pursue in light of the contradictions that their determination of the concept can provoke. According to this reading traditions which do not have a notion of god(s) are deemed to be either not actually religions in the proper sense, or represent "primitive" or inchoate manifestations of the true form of the religious. Hegel, for example, can be read as a proto-Comtean, suggesting that religions form a socio-historical hierarchy that proceeds from tribal religions characterized by notions of force, to "Asiatic" religions, eventually to Roman Paganism, Judaism, and finally to the "truly" religious realm embodied in the monotheistic idea of love expressed most fully in (protestant)

---

[110] Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms*, 19.

Christianity. Weber follows a similar strategy by revoking the status of religion from totemic traditions, arguing that their practices are best classed as forms of magic. The drawback to re-classifying traditions as a- or proto-religious is that only ethical monotheistic traditions, specifically Judaism, Christianity and Islam retain the status of actual religions. Even if this list is expanded to include Zoroastrianism and polytheistic traditions such as Hinduism and the Paganisms of classical antiquity, many of the world's cultures throughout much of recorded history are left without religion. As Hegel's hierarchy of world religions implies, a Eurocentric chauvinism can creep into the concept of religion when it is defined as a belief in god(s).

The prevalence of belief-based definitions of the religious and its subterranean connection to Eurocentricism need not be surprising. It will be recalled that the notion of religion as distinct from other cultural manifestations, first emerged during Europe's modernity. The "religion" that was differentiated from other moments of the social was not religion in the abstract but a concrete historical instantiation of it: European Christianity. Augustine defined true religion as "the worship of the one true God, that is, the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit."[111] That this self-referential definition of Christianity should have presented itself as a definition of religion in general to modern philosophers and social theorists who first examined religion as a distinct object of (sociological) study, seems understandable. Augustine's politically motivated conflation of religion and Christianity is exemplary of an endemic lack of distinction in the works of many European theorists of religion, such as the aforementioned Fichte. The concepts

[111] Augustine, "Of True Religion," 218.

"religion" and "Christianity" are often used interchangeably. The view that the central tenet of the particular instance, the Christian insistence on the belief in God, on ortho-*doxy*, can legitimately be expanded to the universal, the religious as such, is problematic because it is not the general that is universalized but the *differentia*, that is precisely what is not common to all instances of the particulars.

There is a sinister side to this manner of theorizing which needs to be taken into consideration: the fact that the formation of the notion of religion coincided with European colonialism has left traces in the "abstract" concept. "Religion," much like the concept "civilization," could be marshaled to justify colonial expansion. By defining religion as a belief in (a monotheistic) god, and regarding this belief system as a sign of progress, as Hegel seems to suggest, non-European cultures that expressed religiosity in different ways could be simply regarded as the laggards of history who could only be rectified by European intervention. To be blunt: religion is something civilized people have, and if a given people do not have it, then they are by extension not civilized. One of the virtues of Durkheim's method is that as an ethnographer and (proto)-sociologist he begins with empirical data gathered from different civilizations and historical periods, as opposed to *a priori* trying to make his data fit an abstract idea. This inductive method tends to preclude making culturally specific generalizations, and helps to prevent forming a concept of religion in the abstract sense decried by Marx. In fact, Durkheim is at pains to show that those cultures generally regarded as lacking a "coherent religion," those Weber classed as mere practitioners of magic, are as religious as any "civilized" European.

Let me suggest yet one more problem with belief-based definitions of religion which Durkheim himself does not broach. As Slavoj Zizek points out, the question of what it might mean to believe is by no means self-evident. So far, I have been emphasizing that belief-based definitions of religion seem to imply that religious belief must be literal. What happens to the strong version of the secularization-thesis, however, if belief is not construed as necessitating literal belief? Zizek provides a witty if perhaps apocryphal example suggesting that belief is a problematic sociological category.[112] According to Zizek, the physicist Niels Bohr was receiving a guest at his holiday home in Denmark. The guest was surprised to find a horseshoe on the front door of Bohr's cottage, obviously meant to bring good luck. I paraphrase Zizek's account of the exchange that followed: "But Niels" said the guest, "You have a horseshoe on your door. I had no idea you believe in such things. You're a rational man, a scientists!" "I don't" said Bohr, "but I was told it works whether one believes in it or not." Bohr's answer indicates that belief is a highly ambiguous concept. Who actually knows what one believes oneself, let alone anyone else? Evidence for this comes even from Christian authors, who sometimes feared that their belief was not genuine enough.[113] The notion that subjects have straightforward definable convictions rests on a rather naïve theory of

---

[112] See, Slavoj Zizek, *The Universal Exception: Selected Writings*, ed. Rex Butler and Scott Stephens (London: Continuum, 2006), 306-307. This anecdote is also found in Slavoj Zizek *First as Tragedy then as Farce* (New York: Verso, 2009).

[113] See, Mt. 4.1-11; Mk. 1.12-14; Lk 3.21-22. The template for this is already given in Christian scripture, where Jesus's forty days in the desert and his temptation by the Devil have been interpreted as expressing moments of doubt. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf, vol. 1. (New York: Basic Books, 1963), 175 – 179. For an anthropological analysis also see, Levi-Strauss' example of the "doubting shaman."

human psychology, such as is posited in Jeremy Bentham's pleasure-calculus for instance. However, is this not the psychological shallowness and naïveté that must be attributed to human subjectivity if strong versions of the secularization-thesis are to be espoused? The choice: either one believes wholly and literally in a religious cosmology or one does not believe at all. However, if belief is difficult, if not impossible to measure, even with respect to one's self, then the secularization-thesis, or Weber's conclusion, both of which assume that religious belief is in decline, are at best uncertain.

Belief is a problematic concept in social theory if the ambivalence and ambiguity germane to subjectivity and culture are recognized. It also implies a conception of religion understood primarily as an etiology, a pseudo-scientific cosmology, meant to explain natural phenomena. Once an older scientific theory has been displaced by a newer model better able to account for the given facts, the only rational course of action is to accept the new theory. However, this conception of religion as essentially determined by belief in its etiology, assumed in secularism and espoused by most Weberian-Marxists, is problematic. We encounter here the rather curious supposition of the Weberian-secularist thesis, but which is expressed most clearly in reductive Marxian theories of religion, that once the "false consciousness" or "illusions" of religion have been recognized as such, the religious itself simply falls away. This line of reasoning demands that religion be regarded as an explanatory system along the lines of scientific inquiry. Expressing the world in some "direct" almost "literal" way as science attempts to do,– or, to be more accurate, as naïve philosophies of science assume that it does – need not be deemed an essential aspect of the religious, however.

To put the problem with this view into perspective, let us imagine another example again inspired by Zizek,[114] this time one in which an audience member watching a performance of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* exclaims after the curtain dropped: "Yes, this is all well and good, but I don't believe it. That man is not *really* the king of Denmark, he is an actor. And furthermore, this is not Denmark but a stage." The obvious reason this pronouncement is out of place in terms of the truth-content of the play is precisely because it is a play. To assume that the actors on the stage and the stage itself must in some sense literally express the "real" misses the point. Charles Rosen notes precisely this "double movement" of expressing reality by conjuring "fictions" in Benjamin's *Tragic Drama* . He writes, "Benjamin relates the breaking of illusion, the staginess of the *Trauerspiel* [*Tragic Drama*], to the effort to express the 'play' character of life itself, which has lost its ultimate seriousness in the despair of Counter-Reformation theology." It is in the very "staginess" of the play that its truth is to be found. Indeed, with respect to *Hamlet*, the truth of treachery is revealed precisely at the moment when a play is staged within play. Similarly, supposing that religion is primarily a mistaken way of understanding natural phenomena in lieu of science, misses what, from a Durkheimian perspective, is at issue in religion, namely the codification of meaning, and not a referential theory of nature for the purpose of scientific-technical mastery.

Weber and the Weberian-Marxists tend to regard the religious as being essentially constituted by beliefs. Therefore, as these beliefs are replaced by scientific knowledge

---

[114] See, Slavoj Zizek, *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema*, directed by Sohpie Finnes, 2006. See especially Zizek's discussion of Lars von Trier's 2003 film *Dogville*.

and technical mastery, religion declines in influence. The science fiction writer Arthur C. Clark claimed that any sufficiently advanced technology will seem like magic to those who do not understand it. Weber and many Marxian theorists of religion seem to articulate a similar position, but in reverse, with respect to the religious, arguing that for pre-moderns, the religious functions by populating the cosmos with spirits, deities, and other "supernatural" creatures, thereby making the unknown knowable. The drive towards rationalization in modernity, Weber believes, results in a hollowing out of the spiritualized cosmos. However, the undisclosed positivist supposition that informs Weber's and many Marxian theories of religion, as well as strong versions of the secularization-thesis more generally, is expressed in the conviction that the psycho-social taxonomy can be replaced by a non-symbolic "scientific" discourse with direct access to "truth." This supposition is unwarranted.

There are two related problems with this thesis. First, as Zizek points out, by the 21st century the expert jargon of scientists and other specialists is so far removed from the life-world of the non-experts that it cannot function as a coherent meaning-system.[115] A deeper problem is noted by Benjamin, who following the logic of Hegel's dialectic, argues in "Goethe's Elective Affinities," that the medium first produces that which it seems to mediate, that is the "thing-in-itself," is always already the "thing-for-us" (*SW1*, 351; *GS1*, 195.) The "screen" through which reality is perceived is what is meant by reality itself. Without the symbolic, the real is lost. However, because of the bourgeoisie's politically warranted, but historically erroneous association of a-religiosity

[115] Zizek, *The Matrix or, the Two Sides of Perversion*, *Philosophy Today* 43 (1999).

or secularism with social progress and religion with a stagnant feudal order, resistance to the notion that modernity is religious remains. The claim, however, becomes less problematic, if we move away from the belief-based conceptions which construe the religious as a pseudo-scientific *Weltanschauung*.

Belief-based definitions of religion fail to account for religion as a universal. Instead, they secretly emphasize a culturally specific instance of the religious, often Christianity or more generously, ethical monotheism(s), and suggest that this particular instance expresses the underlying essence of the phenomenon as such. The task at hand then is to determine the concept in a way that it is broad enough to be a universal and yet specific enough to correctly distinguish the religious without also naming too many other related phenomena. The explanatory power of Durkheim's theory of religion, what I above called his Copernican turn, derives in part from the fact that he recognizes that the methodological bias towards individualism, imbedded in the western intellectual tradition, is detrimental to the project of theorizing religion. That the individual is the primary "site" for religion is an unquestioned presupposition in most modern European theories. Whitehead represents the logical conclusion to this line of reasoning when he defines religion as, "what an individual does with his solitariness."[116]

Durkheim, by contrast, regards religion as "eminently social." Like Marx, he understands that the individual is the result of a social process not its starting point. This acknowledgement leads Durkheim to replace the abstracted individual with the concrete

---

[116] Alfred North Whitehead, *Religion in the Making: Lowell Lectures 1926* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1996), 47.

social group as the focal point of analysis. The consequence of re-conceptualizing the analysis from the perspective of the social, instead of the individual, is an almost complete inversion of the European philosophical *cum* sociological notion of what constitutes religion. Whereas Søren Kierkegaard, for example, had introduced the distinction between Christianity and Christendom to highlight the importance of individual faith in contrast to "empty ritual" as the key ingredient in a religious life, Durkheim claims that beliefs are in fact only retrospective justifications of social practices.[117] He argues that beliefs are largely irrelevant, if not detrimental, to understanding religion as such. Bart Ehrmann, the scholar of early Christian writings, makes Durkheim's point with an empirical example, explaining that, "The gods [of ancient Rome] were not impressed by anyone's beliefs about them nor did they require people to say the proper creed or acknowledge the proper 'truths.' Odd as this may seem to us moderns, doctrine played virtually no role in these religions: it scarcely mattered what people believed."[118] By critically revaluing the status of the abstracted individual as the methodological starting point of most inquiries into the nature of religion, Durkheim stands not only Kierkegaard, but most of the European philosophers and social theorists of religion back on their feet.

---

[117] Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).
[118] Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 24.

IV – Religion as Social Praxis

To manage the complexity that the focus on beliefs engenders, Durkheim suggests a different strategy. Instead of attempting to define the central belief(s) common to all religions, Durkheim proposes looking for an underlying principle which gives rise to the religious systems themselves. His strategy is to find a proto-religious moment, logical, but not necessarily temporal, which opens the dimension to the religious; he is seeking the *Ursprung* [origin] in Benjamin's sense. "What we want to do," notes Durkheim, "is to find a means of discerning the ever-present causes upon which the most essential forms of religious thought and practice depend."[119]

This *Ursprung*, Durkheim argues, resides in a primary and elemental distinction, which organizes the world into two radically separate domains. Crucial to note is that Durkheim shifts the focus here from what religious adherents believe to social practice, from the individual to the collective. He maintains that:

> All known religious beliefs, whether simple or complex present one common characteristic: they presuppose a classification of all the things, real and ideal, of which men think, into two classes or opposed groups, generally designated by two distinct terms which are translated well enough by the words *profane* and *sacred* (*profane, sacré*). This division of the world into two domains, the one containing all that is sacred, the other all that is profane, is the distinctive trait of religious thought; the beliefs, myths, dogmas and legends are either representations or systems of representations which express the nature of sacred things, the virtues and

[119] Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms*, 20.

powers which are attributed to them, or their relations with each other and with profane things.[120]

The sacred is that which is protected and isolated by prohibitions.[121] The sacred is not limited to personal beings but can obtain to any object at all.[122] Religions, discovers Durkheim, are not united by a common belief in something, but rather by a common activity: ritual activity which results in the classification of the world into sacred and profane domains. All existing religions organize the world in this way. A preliminary definition of the concept can now be proposed: the abstract concept of religion is determined by *ritual activity* that generates the distinction between the profane and sacred. Any time this distinction is socially operative, we find ourselves within the realm of the religious.

Let us return to a statement in Benjamin's "Capitalism" fragment in light of Durkheim's claim that ritual, not belief, is at the core of religion. Benjamin qualifies his suggestion that Capital is a religion as follows, "In the first place, capitalism is a purely cultic religion, perhaps the most extreme that ever existed. In Capital, things have a

---

[120] Ibid., 52.
[121] Ibid., 56.
[122] See W.S.F. Pickering, "The Sacred's Own Binary System" in *Durkheim's Sociology of Religion: Themes and Theories* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984.) Pickering notes that according to Durkheim, the sacred can be both consecrated or accursed. The distinction between the two forms of the sacred is developed by Durkheim's occasional co-author and nephew, Marcel Mauss, and later Mauss' student and Benjamin's friend, Bataille. Cf. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, ed. Werner Hamacher and David E. Wellbery, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 75 – 80. Agamben contested the ambiguity of the sacred, writing that it is a "mythologem that not only explains nothing but is itself in need of explanation" (80.)

meaning only in their relationship to the cult; capitalism has no specific body of dogma, no theology" (*SW1*, 288; *GS4*, 100.)[123] The religion of capitalism has a cult, but no theology, which amounts to saying that it is a religion defined exclusively by ritual without dogmatic content. And in the "Dialogue on Contemporary Religiosity," Benjamin claims that this new religion becomes a cult, and asks, "Are we not thirsting for convention that would have spiritual, ritual meaning?" (*Early Writings*, 74; *GS2*, 29.)[124] If we read Benjamin as arguing for a definition of this modern religion as characterized by ritual, and if we theorize the role of ritual in the way Durkheim suggests, we can establish a thoroughly "anthropological materialist" theory of religion that nonetheless affirms the religious in the social. We can read Benjamin with Marx on religion.

To see how this is the case, let us return to the Weber-Durkheim "debate" about the role of belief and ritual. Weber decried that (vulgar) Marxists focused solely on the material base when explaining the rise of Capital, and he countered with the need to include super-structural content. However, the importance of the new Protestant beliefs is to be found in the actions that they inspire. It is not the beliefs themselves but the actions in-the-world that beliefs justify which are of socio-historical consequence. So is Durkheim right after all when he claims that it is action not ideas that are of central import, at least with respect to a theory of the social? Indeed, there seems to be a potential for an endless regress regarding the primacy of action versus beliefs. Does belief precede

---

[123] *Erstens ist der Kapitalismus eine reine Kultreligion, vielleicht die extremste, die es je gegeben hat. Es hat in ihm alles nur unmittelbar mit Beziehung auf den Kultus Bedeutung, er kennt keine spezielle Dogmatik, keine Theologie.*"

[124] "*Dürsten wir nicht nach geistiger, kultischer Konvention*?"

action, or does action precede belief? Durkheim may simply be articulating "the other side of the coin" when he argues that ritual practice should be seen as primary.

The deadlock between the relative importance of beliefs and rituals in relation to religion can be resolved, if we follow Durkheim in his argument that ritual activity creates the foundations for reason and by extension for belief as such. Even though thought and action are constantly co-determining each other, Durkheim argues that the "origin" or "foundation" of communicability and reason cannot be based on thought. Ultimately, it must be based on action. His theory echoes aspects of what Marx suggests in the "Theses on Feuerbach," claiming that thought is shaped by praxis. In essence, Durkheim argues that ideas cannot be communicated unless they have some basis in collective experience. This collective experience cannot, however, be based first in the ideas themselves. Since purely individual ideas are limited to individual subjects, they do not entail their own grounds for communication.

In a sense, Durkheim's theory can be read as an answer to Meno's paradox. Meno's question to Socrates centers on the logical (im)possibility of learning. The problem, as Meno explains, is that if something is not known, it cannot be recognized as that something for which one is searching, since one does not know what it is. Alternatively, if one already knows for what one searches, then there is no real meaning to the concept of learning, since one already has the information.[125]

---

[125] Plato, "Meno," in *Five Dialogues*, trans. G. M. A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co, 2002), 70.

Structurally, Meno's paradox re-appears in the modern European philosophical debate regarding the phylogenesis of human reason. Taking my cue from this reading of Meno's paradox, I follow Rawls when she suggests that *The Elementary Forms* provides a solution to the *aporias* that arise in the debate about the origin of reason between Humean-inspired empiricists and what Durkheim terms the "*apriorists*," that is certain readings of Kant and the Neokantians. Durkheim argues that both philosophical positions fall into the methodological trap of starting with the abstracted individual, a mistake that is homologous to the mistake made in the European philosophical tradition with respect to religion. The result is that neither philosophical tradition is able to account for how reason can be established. The *apriorists*, Durkheim argues, avoid the question of where the categories of the understanding come from by positing them as pre-existing the subject. This strategy simply evades the question. How the categories arise in the first place is left to divine intervention, or happenstance. Durkheim maintains that the Humean-empiricists believe that the categories and human reason are derived from individual engagements with nature. Nature, Durkheim counters, is not reasonable and is therefore insufficient to ground the emergence of reason. "But what is completely lacking to us in all this," writes Benjamin, "is proper regard for the social" (*Early Writings*, 65; *GS2*, 19.)[126]

The social, for Durkheim and for Benjamin is thought to have a dynamic irreducible to the actions of individual agents. Instead, as Rousseau argues in *A Discourse on Inequality*, Durkheim posits that reason is created through social practice.

---

[126] "*Aber bei alledem fehlt uns vollkommen die Achtung vor dem Sozialen.*"

Unlike for Rousseau, however, the most basic form of social practice for Durkheim is religious ritual. Durkheim's answer to Meno's paradox is to develop an immanent epistemology that accounts for communication on the basis of embodied, somatic, corporeal sensations. Durkheim suggests that collective activity generates collective experiences, which in turn are the foundation for communicability, reason and the social itself. The introduction of the sacred-profane distinction as constituting the essence of religion allows us to follow Durkheim in his argument that religion is implicated in human sociality and the emergence of reason and to affirm his thesis that beliefs arise subsequent to the practices to which they are related. Beliefs do not justify practice, rather argues Durkheim, practice (ritual) creates the foundations for belief. As a whole, the arguments in *The Elementary Forms* attempt to demonstrate that religious ritual is the primary social process that creates the necessary foundation of shared experiences upon which the categories of thought and eventually fully developed human reason is constructed.

The foundational category, Durkheim theorizes, is the sacred. It forms the basis upon which all subsequent categories and eventually reason itself is constructed, because the sacred entails a somatic moment that is generated through shared experiences. It is the first properly social category of the understanding, and therefore, the first category of the understanding as such. Evidence that the sacred is an entirely social construction is suggested by the fact that an object's sacred character cannot be derived by examining its natural properties. In Volume One of *Capital*, Marx makes a similar point about the social character of value, when we writes that "Not an atom of matter enters into the

objectivity of commodities as values; in this it is the direct opposite of the coarsely sensuous objectivity of commodities as physical objects. We may twist and turn a single commodity as we wish it remains impossible to grasp it as a thing possessing value."[127] Durkheim agrees, indicating with respect to the sacred that if the sacred were based on natural properties, one might expect this status to be reserved for particularly awe inspiring objects or phenomena, such as conspicuously large mountains, thunder, or the sun. However, as his ethnographic study demonstrates, precisely the opposite is the case. It is often the inconspicuous, the seemingly mundane, that is elevated to the status of sacred object.

Durkheim not only suggests that religious ritual creates the notion of the sacred, but also that the notion of the sacred is related to the emergence of the social. The sacred and the social are united in a dialectic of creation, with the third term in this dialectic being reason. Durkheim argues that the social creates the sacred and the sacred establishes the experiential basis for the categories of the understanding, that is for the possibility of communication and, hence reason, which in turn is the "foundation" of the social. Of course, these arguments should be read as logical rather than historical. Unlike other abstract categories of the understanding, the sacred is actually anchored in both personal and social experience. The sacred is physically and psychically experienced as sacred, that is as different, powerful, awe-inspiring. Durkheim will call it a "social fact." This experience is first and foremost generated by and, simultaneously, experienced by a

---

[127] Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. I, III vols. (London: Penguin Books with New Left Review, 1990), 138.

collective through ritual. In ritual, that is in socially enacted practice, a "moral force" is generated sufficient to create a "collective effervescence" that is, to change and harmonize the subjects' collective experiences of certain objects, places and/or times. "If all hearts beat in unison this is because the same force is propelling them in the same direction."[128] Since the sacred must be enacted to exist, and since this enactment results in shared sentiments by those involved, Durkheim believes he has found the answer to the *Ursprung* of human reason and language.

In arguing for the sacred as the first category of the understanding because it is the first social category, Durkheim engages in a speculative and impressionistic account of the effects of religious ritual on the Australian aboriginal. It is worth keeping in mind that Durkheim believes the elements of the religious, found among the Australian aboriginals, are fundamental features of all religious traditions. His hope is that the elements common to all religions are more easily discernable in cultures with relatively undifferentiated social systems. However, he holds that the essence of the religious does not change fundamentally in highly complex social systems. The key features that characterize Australian aboriginal religions are the same as those of Coptic Christianity of the fifteenth century Egypt, or contemporary Sunni Islam, for example. This fact helps explain a conspicuous aspect of his ethnography. Throughout *The Elementary Forms* Durkheim refers almost exclusively to Australian aboriginal tribes to make his case for the universal aspects of religion. This "single case method," is justified if Durkheim's claim is correct that the elements of all religions can be seen in any one example.

---

[128] Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, 56.

Although not clearly articulated in *The Elementary Forms*, underlying Durkheim's argument about religion in relation to the emergence of reason and the social is the analytic distinction of a divided subject. In an article published in *Scientia*, subsequent to *The Elementary Forms*, Durkheim explained that a dualistic conception of the human subject split between first and second nature informed his argument.[129] He suggests that on the symbolic level, the sacred-profane distinction reproduces a subject split into the "animal" and "social" or, what Marx might term "species being." The profane symbolically represents the subject's "pre-rational" or "animal" self, while the sacred refers to the social, the "truly human" realm. Reminiscent of Feuerbach's argument, Durkheim claims, for example, that the idea of the soul is the idea of society internalized, whereas the idea of the material body is classed as profane.[130] For Durkheim, this fact explains why many theologies maintain that the soul outlives the corporeal individual. Society really does continue after the empirical subject has vanished into death, and, as a result, the symbolic representation of the soul outliving the material body can be seen as accurate; true, in the same sense that Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is true. I agree

---

[129] Cited in Rawls, *Epistemology and Practice*, 72.

[130] See, Origen, "On First Principles," in *Origen*, trans. Rowan A. Greer (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 215. The prescience of Durkheim's insight that religious representations symbolically express a subject split between natural and social being, becomes evident when we (re-)turn to religious texts. In light of Durkheim's analysis, it is worth re-reading the third century Neoplatonic Christian theologian, Origen, for example. In a passage dedicated to the nature of sin and redemption, Origen writes, "even if the mind falls through negligence so that it cannot receive God into itself purely and entirely, it nonetheless always retains in itself, as it were, certain seeds of restoration and of being recalled to a better understanding, when the 'inner man' (cf. Rom. 7:22), which is also called *the rational man*, is called back to the image and likeness of God, who created him" (emphasis added).

with Rawls, however, when she notes that the multiple strains of this complex argument are not clearly demarcated in *The Elementary Forms* and this has resulted in significant misreading of Durkheim's intentions.

To return to the phenomenological account of ritual, according to Durkheim's study, aboriginal clan members living in a traditional indigenous context, spend most of their existence roaming in small family based social units, focused on the mundane activities of survival. However, at pre-appointed festival days, these bands gathered into large groups to perform religious rites. Merely the fact of congregating into a large group, Durkheim suggests, would have an immense psychic impact on people who spend most of their lives in small and isolated social settings. This psychic intensity is heightened when the emotions and thoughts of the individual tribes people are unified through coordinated movements and sounds. Durkheim argues that these changed circumstances are rooted in the subject's psycho-psychical apparatus. As religious rituals become more intense, this subjective experience is heightened. Durkheim maintains that this is the process which first suggests the idea of the sacred. Social enactment leads to somatic changes in the subject that are experienced as changes in the environment. The air "feels charged." There is an "energy" that pervades the members. Many contemporary corollary examples can be appended here: the congregation of fans at a sporting event or political rallies, particularly those that emphasize collective rituals, as did the National Socialists, echo aspects of this process.

That ritual precedes belief was powerfully depicted in Denis Gansle's 2008 film, *Die Welle*. Reiner Wenger, a high school teacher in Germany, played by Jürgen Vogel,

asked his students whether a new fascism like one similar to that of the Third Reich were possible in contemporary Germany. His students explain that the Third Reich was an exceptional situation that was unlikely to be repeated, citing the fact that racism, particularly anti-Semitism, was not something they or their peers believed. Over the course of the semester, this teacher manages to recreate an environment in the classroom shockingly similar to that of Germany in the 1930s. Interestingly, he does not accomplish this through any sort of ideological indoctrination. Instead, he begins by having his students engage in rudimentary rituals, such as marching together in unison. This simple group activity, totally non-verbal, already has an effect on many of his pupils. New bonds begins to develop between the classmates. The class begins to understand itself as part of the "insider-group," which only later expresses itself in symbols and narratives. The process of group formation, of creating "mechanical solidarity," to use Durkheim's term, is accomplished by ritualized group activity, not from ideological persuasion. The ideology follows the formation of the group, and the formation of the group is the consequence of ritual. The ideology itself, however, is not actually the valence that binds the group together.[131]

Durkheim suggests that the power of ritual to generate feelings that only later are converted into beliefs is also recognized by some evangelizing Christians who wish to win back "lost souls." Those who are most successful at this, argues Durkheim, do not attempt to convince people of the veracity of their beliefs. Instead, an attempt is made to have those who have left the Church return for a ritual, say, Sunday Mass, knowing that a

---

[131] Dennis Gansel and Peter Thorwarth, *Die Welle*, directed by Dennis Gansel, 2008.

sense of peace, community, and well-being will likely be the consequence. These feelings are generated by ritual, rituals that internalize the sacred, and are only later justified by thought. To return to the question about the role of the ideal in the real, Durkheim hereby accounts for the ideal in wholly immanent, materialist terms. Collective group ritual, that is material praxis, is what generates the ideational moment, just as Marx had argued in his later writings.[132] For Durkheim, there is no radical disjuncture between the "real" and the "ideal" since both are necessarily mediated, even constructed, by the social.

Religion is an illusion, a mistake, or "false consciousness" to the extent that religious practitioners tend to assume that the feeling of the sacred is logically prior to the ritual, that ritual is dependent on a pre-existing sacred, when, in actuality, the sacred is produced *by* the ritual. Durkheim notes that religious practitioners tend to attribute the psycho-physical changes generated by religious ritual to the sacred object, place, or time instead of to the ritual that generates the notion of the sacred. Levi-Strauss provides an instructive warning germane to the problem of relying on religious practitioner's interpretation of their experiences, writing that anthropological fieldworkers:

> are always in danger of confusing the native's theories about their social organization [...] with the actual functioning of the society [....] The sociological representations of the natives are not merely a part or a reflection of their social

---

[132] See, for example, Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," in *The German Ideology* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1998).

> organization. The natives may just as in more advanced societies be unaware of certain elements of it, or contradict it completely.[133]

It is important to emphasize that the error Durkheim identifies with respect to the experience of the sacred resides in assuming that religious beliefs provide the literal justification for the practitioners' ritual actions. This problematic notion is repeated by belief-based social scientific theories of religion. Both (naïve) religious practitioners and belief-based theories of religion assume that, in the final analysis, it is the content of the beliefs that express the purpose of ritual. Again, Durkheim argues that beliefs only arise subsequent to ritual practice. Their actual function is to justify the underlying objective reason for religion's existence, which is the need to have community members congregate and re-affirm their social bonds. "Religions" writes Benjamin, "arise out of [...] need [...]" (*Early Writings*, 70; *GS2*, 25.)[134] The social-sacred must be continuously renewed. The underlying purpose and result of ritual congregation is to generate solidarity among group members. The Australian clansperson, who wanders with a small group of family members through the Outback has little that binds her to the larger tribe. And yet, the tribe is necessary for survival: exogamous marriages, protection, trade. Similarly, the contemporary Christian or the German burgher of the 1930s does not have any self-evident emotive ties with their larger community. Therefore, Durkheim reasons, some

---

[133] Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, 130.

[134] "*Religion aber kommt aus der Not.*" The full English passage reads, "Religions, however, arise out of difficulty and need [*Not*], not out of prosperity [*Glück*]." A note on translation: The German term "*Not*" can be variously translated as "emergency," "need," "adversary," "poverty." The specific context under investigation suggests the term "need" more so than "difficulty." I believe that including both terms in the English translation somewhat obscured Benjamin's point.

mechanism is needed to renew bonds of solidarity with community members. This renewal of the social is the purpose of religious ritual specifically, and religion as such generally. The aim of all ritual is to create identification with the collective. This is the "objective content of religion." Religion, as the etymology of the term suggests, binds people together.

The competing belief-based materialist theories of religion of Marx, Weber, Feuerbach, and Comte, among others, do not explain religion's existence, but tend, rather to explain religion away by suggesting that at bottom religion is a fundamental misunderstanding of reality. Durkheim maintains that while religious beliefs may not function the way a devotee might assume, religion is not, therefore, illusory. By contrast, many social theorists who presuppose belief-based definitions of religion, have needed to attribute ignorance or even moments of hallucination to religious practitioners in order to explain the phenomenon, since the content of religious beliefs and the specific acts that comprise rituals are often only tenuously related to the effects they are purportedly meant to ensure. This observation seems to confirm the Eurocentric biases encoded into the concept of religion by suggesting that there is an intellectual deficiency of some sort in those who are religious. In fact, some modern atheist polemicists have suggested appending a final stage to Hegel's hierarchy of world religions, in which overcoming the delusion of religion is the truly final stage of human intellectual development beyond (European) monotheism.

Durkheim's emphasis on the objective content of religion also explains the resilience of ostensibly absurd religious dogma and praxis. If the religious practitioner's

justification for ritual were really the reason for the ritual's existence, then it should be expected that whenever the desired results the ritual was meant to bring about did not materialize, the ritual would be discarded as useless. Why engage in mimetic rites aimed at ensuring the reproduction of important animals if these rites have little effect on the likelihood of the animals actually proliferating? In locating ritual practice aimed at (re-)generating the sacred-profane distinction as the essential core of the concept, Durkheim demonstrates that religion is not based primarily on illusion, and religious practitioners do not act from a place of error.

Mimetic rites meant to ensure that animals reproduce are enacted to secure the survival of the community. This is actually accomplished by the ritual. Not because mimetic rites create animals, but because engaging in these rites re-creates the community as a community. Religion is based on entirely material conditions. The sacred is not only psychically but also physically felt as powerful, special and vital. The ritual really creates moments of shared experience that found solidarity among community members. Durkheim's comprehensive definition follows: "a religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community [...] all those who adhere to them."[135]

---

[135] Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms*, 62. Despite the fact that the term "belief" precedes "practice" in this definition, the argument in *The Elementary Forms* as a whole clearly militates against a belief-based definition of religion. Of course, religion is actually constituted by belief, but as Durkheim indicated beliefs arise *subsequent* to the rituals they justify. This is an example of Durkheim's problematic manner of presentation that Rawls points out, and which she suggests leads to the misreading of his theory.

If we follow Durkheim's insistence that religion is defined by ritual activity, that it creates and maintains the distinction between the sacred and profane, and that religion answers an objective human need that does not diminish as societies become more internally differentiated, then we are closer to affirming his and Benjamin's conclusions that religion remains central to the social, even in modernity. However, we may raise an objection on semantic grounds. Durkheim and Benjamin both suggest that the functions of the religious have been take over by "non-religious" institutions. This view leads both to claim that these institutions are therefore fundamentally religious. Benjamin, after all, suggests Capital itself is a religion, and Durkheim maintains that the social is always religiously constituted. However, could it not be argued that precisely the opposite is the case, that because the function of religion has been taken over by "secular" institutions, religion itself has disappeared? Certainly, if religion is defined primarily by belief in the supernatural or a divinity, then the secularist thesis and Weber's conclusions are convincing. However, if religion is defined by ritual activity, as Durkheim argues, then secularism in its strong version amounts to a neologism for a new *form* of religion. According to Durkheim's definition, any institution primarily designed to generate feelings of solidarity and group membership is a religious institution, regardless of the "belief(s)" associated with it. This recognition allows us to read Benjamin's "theological" statements as not necessarily expressing a literal dogmatic belief in a religious tradition.

In *One-Way Street* for example, Benjamin echoes Durkheim's suggestion that the nation state is religiously constituted. He writes, "The provider for all mankind is God, and the State is his deputy" (*SW1*, 481; *GS4*, 138.)[136] This statement, characteristic of many similar claims in his oeuvre, together with his references to Carl Schmitt's political-theology in *Tragic Drama,* furnishes additional evidence that Benjamin has a conception of the religious that is closer to Durkheim than to Weber (see *Tragic Drama*, 105-106; *GS1*, 245-246.) As Wiesenthal, Samuel Weber and Horst Bredekamp all note, Benjamin was an admirer of Schmitt's *Political-Theology.*[137] Benjamin even sent a letter introducing himself and priming Schmitt for the arrival of his newly finished book.[138] Schmitt's central argument in *Political-Theology* is that the modern European state imported wholesale the structures of the Medieval Christian state, while suppressing explicit reference to God. The fundamental structure of the European state, argues Schmitt, is nonetheless religious, specifically Christian. On this point, Schmitt seems to approach Durkheim's general insistence that the religious is retained by modernity, that "secular" structures like the state manifest a religious dimension. Benjamin's esteem for Schmitt's theory is another indication that his thought can be read with Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms*, rather than Weber's *Protestant Ethic.*

---

[136] "*Der Ernährer aller Menschen ist Gott und der Staat ihr Unterernährer.*"
[137] Wiesenthal, *Zur Wissenschaftstheorie Walter Benjamins*, 17; Samuel Weber, "Taking Exception to Decision: Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt," *Diacritics* 22, no. 3/4 (Autumn - Winter 1992): 5-18; Horst Bredekamp, "From Walter Benjamin to Carl Schmitt, via Thomas Hobbes," *Critical Inquiry* 25, no. 2 (Wntr 1999): 247-266.
[138] Bredekamp, "From Walter Benjamin to Carl Schmitt, via Thomas Hobbes," 248.

V – The Totem as the Symbolic Anchor

We need to trace Durkheim's theory still further in order to define more precisely the modern form of the religious, to understand how the state or Capital can be deemed a religious phenomenon. Central to Durkheim's conception of religion is the notion of the totem, which is the representation of the sacred. After his philosophical introduction, Durkheim begins his ethnographic analysis by investigating the social functions inscribed in the totem. He discovers that the totem is the fundamental sacred object which structures the clan's entire symbolic universe. It is the paragon of the sacred object. "In fact, it is in connection with it [its religious character] that things are classified as sacred or profane."[139] It is in relation to the totem that the sacred-profane distinction is first applied and it is the totem which moors a clan's entire psycho-social taxonomic system.

The totem is generally a plant or animal, although, in some cases, natural forces such as wind or rain can serve this function as well.[140] It is not any specific object such as a particularly conspicuous tree. Rather the totem includes all the members of that class of objects.[141] Durkheim notes that the rituals performed by many aboriginal tribes imply that there is actually a higher level of abstraction at work in relation to the totem. It is not usually the empirically existing totemic object that is worshiped, but rather abstract representations of it. That is, the totemic object is thought to be the outward expression of a more general essence, which is often depicted by symbolic markings. These images, and not the totemic being itself, become the focal point of the cult.

---

[139] Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms*, 140.
[140] Ibid., 124.
[141] Ibid., 125.

In the clan's imaginary, the totem has multiple functions. "The totem is a name first of all and then, as we shall see, an emblem."[142] In this respect it is a marker of group identity, differentiating one clan from another within a given tribe. Conspicuous features of the totem are often used to adorn the body at ceremonial events, illustrating the individuating aspect of totemic insignia.[143] The totem is also "a veritable coat-of-arms whose analogies with the arms of heraldry have often been remarked."[144] The totem as emblem can also serve as a marker of ownership. Symbols representing the totem are often displayed on houses, weapons, or other items. There are also affinities, as Durkheim indicates, between the totem and the surname. Like the totem, the surname is often shared by a large group of people only distantly related. It serves as a marker of individual and group identity as well as marking ownership. Like family names, the totem furnishes a common point of (often imagined) ancestral origin and the totemic object is often considered to be either the embodiment of the primordial ancestor or to share a yet more distant ancestor with the clan.

Unlike the surname, however, the totem is a religious object. "It is the very type of sacred thing."[145] It is set apart from other similar objects by prohibitions and regulations relating to hygiene, maturity, gender, status, and religious power. Often these regulations include dietary restrictions. Benjamin references the logic of the taboo when he notes the strict rules that tended to accompany sacred images in the European tradition:

---

[142] Ibid., 131.
[143] Ibid., 134-137.
[144] Ibid., 134.
[145] Ibid., 140.

> Cult value as such even tends to keep the artwork out of sight: certain statues of gods are accessible only to the priest in the cella; certain images of the Madonna remain covered nearly all year round; certain sculptures on medieval cathedrals are not visible to the viewer at the ground level (*SW3* 106; *GS7*, 358.)[146]

The totem is generally treated with the utmost respect and protected by sanctions. Violating these sanctions can result in banishment or even death. Images of the totem tend to be safeguarded in places designated as sacred themselves, and these places are often governed by further regulations.

Durkheim argues that the centrality of the totem is obscured when modern Eurocentric notions of group membership are (mis)applied to pre-modern and indigenous imaginaries. He maintains that for Australian aboriginals in traditional communities all animate and inanimate things in the universe are "a part of the tribe; they are constituent elements of it and, so to speak, regular members of it; just like men, they have a determined place in the general scheme of organization of the society."[147] By virtue of membership in the tribe, everything in the universe becomes enmeshed in the psycho-social taxonomic system that is structured by the totem. Durkheim gives the example of the Mount Gambier tribe which itself is divided into two phratries: the Kumite and the Kroki.[148] According to Durkheim, the members of this tribe also regard everything in the

---

[146] "*Der Kultwert als solcher drängt geradezu darauf hin, das Kunstwerk im Verborgenen zu halten: gewisse Götterstatuen sind nur dem Priester in der cella zugänglich, gewisse Madonnenbilder bleiben fast das ganze Jahr über verhangen, gwiesse Skulpturen an mittelalterlichen Domen sind für den Betrachter zu ebener Erde nicht sichtbar.*"
[147] Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms*, 166.
[148] Ibid., 166-167.

universe as also being either Kumite or Kroki. That is, everything shares one of two possible essences. The phratries are further divided into ten clans, each with its own sub-totem, and again everything in the universe is further sub-categorized as belonging to one of ten sub-totem groupings. Thus, for the Mount Gambier tribe, "Blackwood trees, dogs, fire, ice, etc.," are all part of the pelican clan which is a sub-set of the Kumite family, while "Kangaroos, summer, sun, wind, autumn, etc.," are thought to share an essence with the Crestless White Cockatoo sub-totem classed under the Kroki totem.[149] As Durkheim explains, when a Mount Gambier tribe member claims that Kangaroos, summer and wind are Crestless White Cockatoos that means that "the same principle is essential to all of them and shared with the animals" of that totem. It does not mean, as some proponents of belief-based characterizations of the religious have claimed, that the indigenous are incapable of making distinctions between animate and inanimate, real and imaginary.

In essence, the totem is the central building block of a psycho-social taxonomy which encompasses the life-world of the clan member. As Durkheim's investigation is intended to show, the totem and its taxonomy are intrinsically related to social organization. The Mount Gambier tribe's manner of organizing the cosmos, Durkheim maintains, is found in one form or another for all the Australian tribes for whom he had data. His argument though, is not limited to an indigenous context. This method of conceptually organizing the life-world is the result of religious activity as such, which

---

[149] Ibid., 167.

Durkheim argues structures European "secular" modernity as much as any pre-modern indigenous community.

Levi-Strauss, with his analysis of the spatial organization of houses in the Winnebago adds another vital insight to Durkheim's observation that the religious casts a semiotic net over the social. He notes that depending on whom one asks in this community, two distinct descriptions of the arrangement of houses are recounted. One group imagines houses in their village forming concentric circles that widen as one moves away from the centre of the community. A second group believe that there is a clear dividing line bisecting the circle of houses. Both groups, Levi-Strauss claims, relate the conception of their community's spatial organization to an origin narrative. However, neither the narratives nor the imagined organization of the community coheres between the two groups. Levi-Strauss suggests that this indicates a primal division in the social that needed to be overcome on the symbolic level. This overcoming was only partially successful, the original trauma not having been fully eradicated as evinced by the differing narrative accounts of the community's internal organization which no longer forms a unity.

One can extrapolate from this example that the religious-symbolic self-representation of a society need not necessarily be shared by everyone in the same way. That is, the symbolic self-representation can include very different, even contradictory representations, which nonetheless belong to the same "moral" community. This insight helps shed more light on the problem of the status of beliefs in religion. As was argued above, beliefs tend to vary to such an extent that it is difficult to arrange them together

under one concept. However, if the unity of the group is maintained, not through its beliefs, but rather through some other mechanism, ritual, then the beliefs themselves can vary greatly and yet still be classified as belonging to the same group, community, or indeed, religion.[150]

In light of this analysis of the totem, we can translate Weber's insights into Durkheim's theory and arrive at Benjamin's conclusion that Capital is modernity's new religion. I follow Rawls when she notes that a consequence of the introduction of Luther and Calvin's theological innovations was that money became the new totem for the European Protestants.[151] In Marx's words, it was "A strange God [who] proclaimed the making of profit as the ultimate and sole purpose of mankind."[152] Does money, or perhaps more accurately, value in Marx's sense, not function in virtually the same way as Durkheim's totem? Is not money, as the universal instance of the commodity form, the fetishized object that must be accumulated, safeguarded, but never actually used? Does it not evince a "metaphysical" character? Is the accumulation of value not the sign of something beyond the given, a marker of identity, the goal of modern life under Capital, and the sign of power? More generally, it could be argued that Capital has become modernity's totemic signifier, measuring the value of everything else in relation to profitability, efficiency and cost. Reading Benjamin' arguments in the *Tragic Drama*, together with his reflections in the *Arcades Project*, suggests that, he regards the commodity form in a manner similar to Durkheim's notion of the totem. A central

---

[150] See, Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, 132-163.
[151] Rawls, *Epistemology and Practice,* 198.
[152] Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I, 342.

premise of the *Arcades* is that commodities are the new emblems of modernity and, therefore, lend themselves to being read allegorically. Marx suggests that the commodity is a fetish, and Durkheim that the totem functions much like an emblem. Thus it seems reasonable to suggest, as Rawls does, that the commodity itself is the totemic emblem in modern Capital.

The question whether this process manifest in modernity actually amounts to the eradication of the religious from the social as suggested by Weber and some Weberian-Marxists, or rather a change in the form of the religious as argued by Durkheim and discernable in Benjamin's fragment, can now be answered in favour of the latter, if the religious is construed as characterized by ritual rather than by belief. In fact, the history of the Protestant Reformation and its after effects that Weber recounts can be reinterpreted along Durkheimian lines. It is helpful to remember Owen Chadwick's insight that secularism refers less to an observable social trend than to a prescriptive political category which had its genesis in the Thirty Years War. This category was taken up by the rising bourgeoisie as a weapon in their (ideological) war against the feudal state. Alexis de Tocqueville and Marx both note the link between the ideological function of the Christian Church and the Feudal aristocracy's political hegemony. In his history of the French Revolution, Tocqueville suggested that the weakest link in the feudal armature was its Christian legitimation, a weakness the new middle class exploited by making reference to all the arguments now recognized under the umbrella of secularism. Secularism, however, not only describes the process by which society becomes a-religious in terms of the political hegemony of Christianity but also refers to a

break with the symbolic system that codified and legitimized the feudal state in Europe. Rawls provides a helpful distinction here when she notes that, "[...] the secularization of religious ideas is not the same thing as the secularization of the functions of religion."[153] Secularism, then, can also describe a process by which a new material base finds its symbolic expression.

Noteworthy with respect to Durkheim and Benjamin's claim that a new religion arises in modernity, is that the Enlightenment's critiques of religion which have been interpreted as Europe's decisive (intellectual) movement away from the religious, can be read as following a well established historical precedent. Most religions for which we have historical records arose first as a critique of an existing religion. That is to say that the critiques of religion we have inherited from the Enlightenment can be understood as critiques of a certain form of the religious from the perspective of a different religious point of view. For example, Buddhism, Jainism and more contemplative and introspective forms of Hinduism all arose during the "axial period" (usually date to 600 – 500 BCE) as a critique of the over-ritualistic religious system of Brahmanism, a form of proto-Hinudism. Christianity too was first and foremost a critical re-interpretation of Judaism, and Islam arose as a critique of the polytheism being practiced on the Arabian peninsula in the seventh century. The ostensibly anti-religious polemics of the Enlightenment were generally not atheist in character but rather anti-clerical, that is not non-religious but a critique of religion from the perspective of religion. Voltaire, generally assumed to be an atheist, was a pantheist. Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason,*

---

[153] Rawls, *Epistemology and Practice*, 288.

which is often used to legitimate atheist criticisms of religion, was actually written in support of religion. The immediate heirs of the Enlightenment, like Nietzsche, are also often thought to have articulated a theory of atheism. Nietzsche's critique was in fact directed at European Christianity, not at religion as such. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is Nietzsche's hope for a new religion, not an atheist polemic. Indeed, with respect to Nietzsche, Benjamin believes he has discovered a prophet of the new religion (*Early Writings*, 79; *GS2*, 34.) Thus, compelling reasons exist to regard the Enlightenment's criticisms of dogmatic and clerical Christianity as a move towards a new form of religious expression.[154]

I suggest that reading Capital with Benjamin and Durkheim as religious illuminates aspects of its appearance that remain hidden when modernity is conceived of as a field fully administered, bureaucratized, de-spiritualized and rationalized. Regarding the commodity form not simply as an instance of the capitalist mode of production, but also as a religious fetish, as suggested by Marx, includes the subjective and social dimensions of experience that inevitably constitute the real and lived encounter with modernity. Marx, in his discussion of alienation, noted the religious experience that Capital provokes. While the objective forces of Capital can be theorized in a rigorous and comprehensive manner, as Marx does, nonetheless, these objective forces confront the modern as godlike spectral powers, even when, contrary to Marx and Weber's reading of

---

[154] See, Horkheimer, "Authority and the Family," 73. Horkheimer reminds us that the Enlightenment's ideological critiques of the Church were attacks on the status of feudal authority, not the ontological status of God.

religion, *the mystification of the fetish is recognized.* Indeed, they function psychologically much the same way as gods do in pagan religions. This fact was also intimated by Weber, who, in his 1922 lecture "Science as a Vocation," suggested that, contrary to the implications of his *Protestant Ethic*, there was a new polytheism emerging in modernity.[155]

Unlike Weber and Marx, who would regard the religious as constituting the wrong side of truth, Benjamin and Durkheim, unhinge religion from a literal belief in a religious cosmology and its etiologies. If religion is not defined as an irrational belief in pseudo-scientific theories but rather by ritual practices that establish the basis for the social, then modernity under Capital can be seen to remain religious. Durkheim's two central categories, sacred and profane, are all encompassing, organizing the entire world into a binary and mutually exclusive opposition. Put another way, nothing "real or ideal" is left out of religious representation. Everything is tinged by the religious because everything participates in the sacred-profane distinction. Defined in this way, there can be nothing that falls outside the concept of religion, as indeed, Benjamin's distinction between myth and theology implies. In this sense the religious is a totalizing concept. It encompasses the entirety of the life-world. As Rawls reads Durkheim, "The concept of totality is but the concept of society in abstract form."[156]

"When, in the religions which later come into being," writes Durkheim:

---

[155] Max Weber, "Science as Vocation" in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. and trans. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 156.
[156] Rawls, *Epistemology and Practice*, 306.

> the gods properly so-called appear, each of them will be set over a special category of natural phenomena, this one over the sea, that one over the air, another over the harvest or over fruits, etc., and each of these provinces of nature will be believed to draw what life there is in it from the god upon whom it depends. This division of nature among the different divinities constitutes the conception which these religions give us of the universe.[157]

The religious process then, is one of organizing the social world, not simply into two opposing monolithic blocks comprised of the sacred on the one hand and the profane on the other. Rather the sacred-profane distinction is continuously operative arranging all elements of the social into relational clusters of meaning. Durkheim's theory of religion, taken together with Levi-Strauss' analysis of the various representations of a community's special organization, suggests that the symbolic is not limited to individual beliefs, but saturates the entire domain of the social.

Durkheim's definition of the religious also problematizes some of the glosses of Benjamin's work. In his "Surrealism," essay, Benjamin speaks of a "profane illumination." Much has been made of this notion in Benjaminian scholarship, because it is assumed that this references a secularization of religious ideas. However, if we follow Durkheim, the very notion of the profane is a *religious concept*. It is half of what constitutes the religious. The profane only exists by virtue of the sacred, and the sacred by virtue of the profane. I argue that Benjamin is suggesting that the notion of profane illumination is turning a religious gaze, illumination, upon those objects, events and

---

[157] Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms*, 179.

phenomena of the social world that are mundane, but not, therefore, "non-religious." Profane illumination means re-integrating a religious perspective derived from a philosophy of religious experience within a theory of culture that denies its existence.[158] That is, if we can grant that secular modernity can be construed religiously, then a method of social analysis that incorporates the subjective dimension of religious experience is required. Benjamin's work, as is already evident in his early essay "On the Coming Philosophy," points toward a method of social analysis that recognizes the religious as a constitutive aspect of the social and, therefore, also of experience. To imagine the religious away, as Weberian-Marxist readers of Benjamin attempted to do, misses the actual manifestation of the form modernity takes. We arrive at an insight of John Milbank, who writes:

> An extraordinary contrast therefore emerges between political-theology on the one hand and postmodern and post-Nietzschean social theory on the other. Theology accepts secularization and the autonomy of secular reason; social theory increasingly finds secularization paradoxical and implies that the mythic-religious can never be left behind.[159]

I argue that Benjamin's incorporation of the religious provides us with the beginnings of a social theory that incorporates the religious dimensions of modernity. In order to trace the broad outlines of how this proposition informs Benjamin's philosophy,

---

[158] Cf. Wohlfarth, "Re-Fusing Theology. Some First Responses to Walter Benjamin's Arcades Project," 21.
[159] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 3.

we now turn to the subjective dimension implied by arguing that the religious constitutes the social, namely to the religious dimension of experience.

Chapter Two – The Transcendence of Truth: God in Benjamin's Critical Epistemology

As I argued in the previous chapter, Durkheim provides us with the broad outlines of a materialist theory of religion which, I maintain, is more helpful for reading the religious in Benjamin's work than descriptions of the phenomenon which emphasize belief. However, having established this theoretical affinity we now need to introduce an important conceptual distinction in Benjamin's notion of the religious which is not central to Durkheim's analysis. As I have endeavoured to demonstrate in the preceding chapter, Durkheim is at pains to show that the symbolic representation of the social is not illusory simply because it is a symbolic representation. For Durkheim, religions are "true," in as much as they carry out their social function, namely, to re-establish group identity through communal rituals that generate a shared symbolic code of the social. Benjamin, however, emphasizes that these symbolic representations of the social can be either true or false. The question for Benjamin is not the Durkheimian one, that is whether symbolic representations contribute to re-establishing the community, but rather whether these symbolic representations encode the possibility of agency and freedom. On the one hand, Benjamin affirms the "Durkheimian moment" when he suggests that there is no "outside" of the religious, that there is no such thing as a non-symbolic unmediated access to the real. On the other hand, Benjamin introduces an essentially biblical distinction, when he refers to the false mode of representing the social with pagan religious categories, the umbrella concept of which is myth or the mythic, while reserving theological categories to gesture towards true symbolic representations.

"Benjamin," notes Rochlitz, "institutes a relation that opposes theology and mythic paganism."[160] By suggesting that myth and theology gesture towards fase and true representations of the social, respectively, Benjamin is employing Hamann's method of metaschematizing. As briefly noted in the introduction, metaschematism was the principle informing Hamann's method of devising thought-images which place the interpretive accent on relationships rather than essences, or, put differently, regards relationships as essences. For Hamann, metaschematizing meant establishing often disparate thought-images in which the key elements of one image stood in either an analogous or homologous relation to the elements in another. Kenneth Haynes notes the theological dimension of Hamann's method, when he writes that "metaschematism is an extension of typology, the practice of reading the Bible in such a way that people and events of the New Testament are foreshadowed or figured by those of the old." [161] Hamann, for example, suggests that his relationship to his peers was essentially the relationship of Socrates to the Sophists, and he made this image the basis for his *Socratic Memorabilia.*

The relationship Benjamin attempts to establish with the notion of the myth-theology distinction is that the modern's imaginary in Capital is in important respects similar to, perhaps even foreshadowed, by the relationship of classical Greek and Roman pagans with their gods. The second part of the thought-image suggests that a Marxian

---

[160] Rainer Rochlitz, *The Disenchantment of Art: The Philosophy of Walter Benjamin*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (New York: The Guilford Press, 1996), 34.
[161] See especially the introduction, by Kenneth Haynes, in Hamann, *Writings on Philosophy and Language*, xi – xii.

recognition of the truth of the social is analogous to the introduction of the biblical message of radical freedom conditioned by a relation to a transcendent and ineffable God.

However, that the mythic and the theological are in fact distinct is not always recognized in the literature examining Benjamin and the religious. Too often, the concepts myth, theology and religion are used interchangeably, as if they all referred to the same object. For example, Roland Boer, in his otherwise excellent article for *Historical Materialism*, writes that Benjamin, "in his very effort to break out of the horrible myth of capitalism [...] reverts to myth itself, especially myth of a distinctly biblical variety." He continues, "I have begun to argue that both Bloch and Benjamin are linchpins for a reconsideration of political myth for the Left, carrying on Georges Sorel's unfinished project."[162] Michael Taussig, argues a similar "Sorealian" point, writing:

> And if the Fascists were willing and remarkably able to exploit these dreams, that did not mean that myth and fantasy were necessarily reactionary. Totally to the contrary, the Left had abandoned this terrain where the battle had to be fought and whose images contained the revolutionary seeds which the soil ploughed by Marxist dialectics could nourish and germinate.[163]

Boer and Taussig are correct in emphasizing that Benjamin rejects the scientism inherent in sociological descriptions to which the Left tends to retreat in its political discourse, and that Benjamin would agree that this positivist moment needs to be supplemented with a non-positivist imaginary. The content of this non-positivist imaginary is what these

---

[162] Roland Boer, "The Perpetual Allure of the Bible for Marxism," in *Historical Materialism* 15 (2007), 59.
[163] Michael Taussig, "History as Sorcery," *Representations* 7 (Summer, 1984): 89.

authors refer to as "myth." However, Boer and Taussig miss Benjamin's second distinction, namely that the non-positivist imaginary can, indeed must, itself be subject to some measure of truth, even if this criterion is itself not scientific in the positivist sense. While the religious as an abstract universal concept contains both true and false representations of the social because according to Durkheim, it is the source of representation as such, Benjamin's second distinction occurs within the domain of representation, and this distinction is indexed in his work by the mutually exclusive concepts of myth and theology. As Benjamin explains in "Goethe's Elective Affinities,":

> What emerges from this is the meaning, *fundamental to all knowledge* of the relation between myth and truth. *This relation is one of mutual exclusion.* There is no truth, for there is no unequivocallness – and hence not even error – in myth. (*SW1*, 325; *GS1*, 162; emphasis added)[164]

Throughout his oeuvre, Benjamin continuously insists that the mythic is distinct from truth, which, as I will demonstrate, he equates with the theological. For Benjamin, the mythic references illusion, the theological refers to Whitehead's "really real." Rochlitz is correct in noting that for Benjamin, "Judaism's or monotheism's sublime represents the antidote par excellence to myth or to any particularist or national ideology."[165]

---

[164] "*Es erweist sich an ihr dir für alle Erkenntnis fundamentale Bedeutung im Verhältnis von Mythos und Wahrheit. Diese Verhältnis ist das der gegenseitigen Ausschließung. Es gibt keine Wahrheit, denn es gibt keine Eindeutigkeit und also nicht einmal Irrtum im Mythos.*"

[165] Rochlitz, *The Disenchantment of Art*, 52.

Benjamin suggests that the mythic imaginary is built around a hard core of fatalism which, in the modern context, results from regarding the human social as essentially similar to the natural, as simply a more complex extension of the natural. If the social is understood in terms of natural categories, then humanity under this sign is governed by objective forces, by "natural" social laws, much like physical matter is governed by gravity. According to this view, freedom and agency are thought to be subjective illusions. Analogous to the natural domain, the mythic imaginary is dominated by a cyclical temporality. As with the changing of the seasons, the mythic is characterized by a continual return of the same. In Benjamin's work, the mythic is the symbolic representation of the domain that Marx and Durkheim would have termed "first nature." The mythic is the representation of the social as natural and, therefore, as fated because humanity in this psychic domain remains determined by the objective forces, not by a self-chosen *telos*.

The mythic is therefore elaborated by Benjamin with the concept of pagan fate, which he sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly, contrasts with a biblical, especially a New Testament theology of radical freedom, such as is elaborated by Augustine, for example. The notion of fate as represented in the literature of classical Greek antiquity essentially expresses the status of this concept in Benjamin's philosophy. In this literature, as in Benjamin's work, fate is descriptive of an encounter with the world in which agency is alienated from subjectivity, externalized and cathected onto some objective force, such as "the market," for example. One thinks of Sophocles' Oedipus, who, in the very act of trying to escape the prophecy of the Delphic Oracle, only managed

to fulfill it. For Benjamin, the modern day mythic imaginary is philosophically justified by positivism and by the scientism inherent in liberal ideologies. Its ideological expression is found in the liberal notion of continued social progress, and, as will be explored below, it is reaffirmed by all the autarkic, atomistic forms that mold the experiences of the modern social under the aegis of Capital. All of these forms of the modern social, from the atomistic ontology of positivism to the disjointed presentation of information in newspapers, contribute to an experience of the social as fundamentally devoid of agency, in which external forces, like ancient mythic gods, control humanity's destiny. Benjamin's thought-image, therefore, suggests that the modern is actually closer in "spirit," as it were, to the ancient pagans and that an awakening to the reality of this condition would be structurally similar to introducing the biblical message of freedom into the Greco-Roman imaginary so dominated by the forces of myth.

Here, however, we encounter a potential limit to reading Benjamin alongside Durkheim. Benjamin maintains that the mythic expresses a relation to the social in which agency is denied, in which humans act by compulsion and force, while the theological gestures towards a radically free relation. Durkheim's theory that the religious is a psycho-social taxonomy generated through communal activity, is based in part on what we might term a "mimetic compulsion." This compulsion, however, seems contrary to the notion of total freedom inherent in Benjamin's understanding of the theological. We recall from the previous chapter that in Durkheim's idiom, the mimetic faculty is the basis for the production of "social effervescence," that force which compels group members to act as a group. It is the basis upon which subjective experience occasioned by group

ritual activity is felt as a psycho-social pressure on group members to participate. It is that social force which compels one to stand at attention during the playing of the national anthem, even when one might be disenchanted with, say, one's country's foreign policy. Durkheim, as was suggested in the previous chapter, argues that religion is a social fact. A social fact is defined, as consisting "of manners of acting, thinking and feeling external to the individual, which are invested with a coercive power by virtue of which they exercise control over him,"[166] and further, "A social fact is identifiable through the power of external coercion which it exerts or is capable of exerting upon individuals."[167] This type of "group think," is antithetical to the notion of radical freedom. One need think only of National Socialism to confirm this insight. The rallies of the National Socialists, which, Durkheim might argue, were part of the formal mechanism that created a "religion of nationalism" in post-Weimar Germany, did not express individual freedom vis-à-vis the social, but its polar opposite. Stating this contradiction more starkly: Durkheim argues that the religious taxonomy of the social is generated through mimetic behavior, while Benjamin might conclude that this type of mimetic behavior is productive only of mythic consciousness, not of a theological relation to the real, which amounts to saying that the mimetic is *not* the source of religion as such.

This paradox can be overcome, however, with recourse to the dialectic. As suggested in the introduction, the appearance of fundamental distinctions belies a more subtle moment in Benjamin's thought, one that recognizes the paradox at the heart of the

---

[166] Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, 52.
[167] Ibid., 56.

human condition. There exists an analogy here with Benjamin's understanding of truth. As will be theorized more fully below, Benjamin argues that truth cannot be predicated and yet, expressing truth is the very point of the philosophical enterprise. The solution that Benjamin suggests is to use language against itself in the hopes that a truth can nonetheless be intimated. This problematic is similar to the one facing us with respect to the theological and the mythic. Whereas Benjamin presents these concepts as totally distinct, as articulating essentially distinct ways of encountering the social, there is, nonetheless, a need to affirm both moments. On the one hand, I follow Durkheim's argument that the mimetic is a necessary moment for establishing the symbolic code of the social and, at the same time, I follow Benjamin in recognizing that remaining entirely determined by this social code, being trapped in a mythic imaginary, is detrimental to the project of social and political emancipation. The mythic in the form of National Socialism, as Benjamin knew only too well, is an extremely dangerous force. However, I follow Durkheim in noting that without ritual, without a certain degree of "mimetic compulsion," there is no social. Benjamin's strategy of replacing a representation of the social devoid of agency, the mythic, with a representation of the social in which agency is affirmed and emphasized, can, I believe, be read together with Durkheim's insistence that the social is constituted through ritual activity, if the dialectic movement between these conceptual polarities is also affirmed. To put this in a Benjaminian idiom: the mythic is a necessary logical moment in order to establish the theological, one which has biblical precedence. Abraham, after all, was a polytheist. He was known as Abram, before being

called by God.[168] Put differently, one needs the social as the basis for freedom from the social, much as Marx posited the need for capitalist production as the basis for its overcoming.

As Benjamin states, "the mimetic faculty has a history [....]" (*SW2*, 720; *GS2*, 210.)[169] For him, mimesis is a rudimentary expression of what later becomes the ability to discern "non-sensuous similarities," which he places in the service of his theory of language and translation, and which, he believes, is central to deciphering the truth of the social. In the 1930s, Benjamin developed the notion of the mimetic faculty as a methodological principle for reading the real. The ability to read non-sensuous relationships in the real is a development of the mimetic faculty that essentially flips it into its opposite. As Benjamin explains:

> [...] language may be seen as the highest level of mimetic behavior and the most complete archive of nonsensuous similarity: a medium into which the earlier powers of mimetic production and comprehension have passed without residue, to the point where they have liquidated those of magic. (*SW2*, 722; *GS2*, 213)[170]

That is to say that while mimesis in Durkheim's sense is generative of mythic consciousness in Benjamin's sense, it nonetheless represents a necessary logical moment, that of establishing the symbolic code of the social, which, once established, even through

---

[168] Gen. 12:1-20.

[169] "*Dieses Vermögen hat aber eine Geschichte* [....]"

[170] The full German sentence reads, "*Dergestalt wäre die Sprache die höchste Stufe des mimetischen Verhatlens und das vollkommenste Archiv der unsinnlichen Ähnlichkeit: ein Medium, in welches ohne Rest die früheren Kräfte mimetischer Hervorbingung und Auffassung hineingewandert sind, bis sie so weit gelangten, die der Magie zu liquidieren.*"

coercion, founds the basis for its own overcoming.[171] Despite its possible liberatory potential, mimetic behavior is by and large a detrimental force. I suggest that here we see an example of the pitfall of trying to read Benjamin's work as characterized by either a materialist or a theological phase which are mutually exclusive. Rochlitz, for example, suggests that, "In his materialist period, Benjamin reformulates his theory of language without resorting to theological terminology, through the concept of mimesis."[172] Yet, mimesis is clearly a category of mythic consciousness, and, therefore, does not replace the myth-theology distinction with materialist concepts, but rather *elaborates* the distinction with materialist concepts.

As alluded to above, although Benjamin maintains that there exist true and false representations of the social, he also insists that truth itself cannot be know. Benjamin emphasizes the distinction between truth and knowledge in part to counter the positivist moment in social theory. Whereas in positivism truth can, at least theoretically, be apprehended and expressed, Benjamin stresses that truth escapes all attempts to codify it. In this argument, Benjamin adopts an essentially pre-modern philosophico-theological position when he equates truth with God. In Benjamin's philosophy, truth is God, and, God is truth. The "God-concept," which, as will be shown below, is not properly speaking a concept, is an unjustifiable but ultimately necessary presupposition of Benjamin's critical epistemology. God, in Benjamin's philosophy is, as Hans Heinz

---

[171] Here it is necessary to affirm that this argument is *logical* rather than historical. Otherwise we might again be liable to fall prey to Eurocentric readings of history which characterize many sociological and anthropological theories of religion.
[172] Rochlitz, *The Disenchantment of Art*, 42.

Holtz has termed it, a "meta-semantic regulative function."[173] In some respects, the "God-concept" in Benjamin's philosophical edifice occupies essentially the same epistemic terrain as do Durkheim's totem, and Levi-Strauss' zero-level, namely, it is the *Ur*-signifier, itself inscrutable, but in reference to which meaning is produced and anchored. Levi-Strauss defined the zero-value institution as, "having no intrinsic property other than that of establishing the necessary preconditions for the existence of the social system to which they belong, their presence – in itself devoid of significance – enables the social system to exist as a whole."[174] Levi-Strauss goes on to identify the paradox occasioned by the fact that the zero-value institution – or, for our purposes the "God-concept" – is both necessary and un-definable, writing, "Anthropology here encounters an essential problem, one which it shares with linguistics [....] This problem is posed by the existence of institutions having no function other than that of giving meaning to the society in which they are found."[175] This, I claim, is the role of God in Benjamin's work.

Although many of Benjamin's readers have emphasized his Jewish or, more generally, his biblical theology, I would suggest that Benjamin's God is the God of the philosophers, especially the God of the Neoplatonists, utterly transcendent, disembodied, and "beyond being." In Chapter Three, I argue that the difference between a mythic and a theological imaginary can be located in whether this original institution is left

---

[173] Hans Heinz Holz, "Idee," in *Benjamins Begriffe*, vol. 2, ed. Michael Opitz and Erdmut Wizisla (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2000), 463.
[174] Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, 159.
[175] Ibid., 159.

symbolically "empty," as in the biblical taboo on making graven images, or whether there is an attempt to symbolize it, as in "paganism." The claim which will be developed in subsequent chapters, is that under Capital, like in the mythic religions of pagan antiquity the symbolic zero-level institution, the totem, the "God-concept," is symbolized. This implicates these cultural constructs in the logic of identity. By contrast, a truly Anarcho-Marxian revolutionary politic attempts to leave an undefined, unrepresented notion of "the human" in the centre, which, following Benjamin's logic of metaschematism, shares affinities with the biblical conception of God according to a strict monotheistic theology.

Benjamin argues that, while truth cannot be known, we come to God through the (Neo)Platonic ideas. Towards the end of the present chapter, therefore, I will examine Benjamin's theory of the ideas, which, though inspired by the Neoplatonists, and ultimately even by Plato himself, enters his philosophy through the works of the Marburg Neokantians. However, before arriving at a discussion of his theory of the ideas, of truth, and of the transcendent nature of God, we begin by discussing Benjamin's philosophy of experience in relation to myth and truth. The connection here might not be immediately evident. The philosophical arch stretching from experience to truth as God, however, is suggested by the author himself when in his early essay "On the Coming Philosophy," perhaps the most important work before the *Tragic Drama* for understanding his philosophy, Benjamin engages in a critique of Kant and the Neokantians on the basis of what can be considered true in experience. Here Benjamin explicitly argues for a return to an understanding of the concept of experience that includes a religious dimension.

How it came to be that Kant thought the religious could be excluded from the concept of experience is, Benjamin argues, historically conditioned, based in part on the type of experience modernity makes available. In a somewhat paradoxical manner, Benjamin guides his readers to the unchanging and unlimited, by reintroducing history and particularity into the notion of subjectivity. According to Benjamin, the notion that there could be a concept of experience devoid of the religious, arises because a historically particular subjectivity, the modern (male) European subject, is absolutized and hypostatized as an unchanging a-historical quantum of existence. By re-historicizing the subject, Benjamin believes he has also found the social forces that impose a limit on the notion of subjectivity which, in turn, leads to experience being valued solely for its scientifically verifiable "essence." That is, experience, for Benjamin, is in part conditioned by the form of the social. If the social is formed such that the experiences it makes available seem to exclude a religious dimension, one should not necessarily conclude that the religious dimension is therefore unreal, or untrue. It is equally possible that the form of the social is "not true" since it does not allow for the religious dimension. The latter, of course, is Benjamin's argument. The form of the modern social produces a particular type of experience, and, therefore, also a concept of experience which is devoid of the religious. Ironically, capitalist modernity produces a mythic determination of experience by attempting to exclude the religious.

In what follows, we begin by examining Benjamin's critique of the Kantian "transcendental" subject, and follow him in re-historicizing it by supplementing his thoughts with the insights of Marx, Bergson, Proust and even, somewhat strangely given

his anti-positivist bent, the Marburg Neokantians. Having established that experience in modernity is to a large extent "not true," that it is mythic, we need to develop Benjamin's notion of truth. Truth, for Benjamin is unchanging and unfathomable. We therefore move from the historical to the unconditioned, from the temporal to the infinite, in an attempt to trace the notion of the religious in Benjamin's theory of experience and, ultimately, to situate the mythic-theological in his epistemo-critical philosophy.

I – "On the Coming Philosophy": Benjamin as a Reader of Kant and the Neokantians

The secondary literature is virtually unanimous in viewing "On The Coming Philosophy," as challenging the concept of experience determined along mathematical-mechanical lines by Kant and the Neokantians. Benjamin seems to say as much when he begins the essay, stating that:

> [...] in the *Prolegomena*, Kant wanted to take the principles of experience from the sciences – in particular mathematical physics; yet from the very beginning and even in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, experience itself and unto itself was never identical with the object realm of that science. (*SW1*, 101; *GS2*, 158)[176]

While the gloss of the secondary literature echoes Benjamin's own introduction, I contend that this essay is as much a critique of the *Neo*kantians as it is of Kant himself. It represents Benjamin's struggle to find his own interpretation of their theories. The

---

[176] *Hat Kant auch, vor Allem in den Prolegomena, die Prinzipien der Erfahrung aus den Wissenschaften und besonders der mathematischen Physik abnehmen wollen, so war ihm doch zunächst und auch in der Kritik der reinen Vernunft die Erfahrung selbst und schlechthin nicht mit der Gegenstandwelt jener Wissenschaft identisch* [....]"

critique of the Neokantians seems, to some extent, inspired by the thoughts of Bergson, whose plea for a human component in the philosophy of experience could be read as the clarion call guiding Benjamin's arguments in this early essay. Bergson:

> Such is, in truth, the ordinary course of philosophic thought: we start from what we take to be experience, we attempt various possible arrangements of the fragments which compose it, and when at last we feel bound to acknowledge the fragility of every edifice that we have built, we end up by giving up all effort to build. But there is a last enterprise that might be undertaken. It would be to seek experience at its source, or rather above that decisive turn where, taking a bias in the direction of our utility, it becomes properly human experience.[177]

While Benjamin's critique of Kant and the Neokantians is perhaps guided by Bergson's central insight, the essay itself is actually mediated by a critique of topics in Kant's Transcendental Idealism, which are of interest to the Marbug Neokantians, particularly the mathematical nature of experience.

I maintain that the Neokantians are a formidable influence on Benjamin's thought: it is in reading the works of the Marburg School, especially Hermann Cohen and Paul Natorp, that Benjamin discovers the contemporary significance of the theory of "rescue of the phenomena," (henceforth, simply "rescue") glimpses of which are already apparent in this essay.

It should be mentioned here, however, that like the role of religion, the role of

---

[177] Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. N. M. Paul and W. S. Palmer (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 184.

Kantianism and Neokantianism in Benjamin's philosophy represents another highly contested front in the post-War reception of his work. Rochlitz, for example, claims that Benjamin merely "dressed up" his philosophy in the language of Neokantianism because it was in vogue in the academy.[178] Rosen, too, maintains that Benjamin's theory owes less to Transcendental Idealism(s) than to the aesthetic theories of the early Romantics, especially Novalis and Schlegel.[179] Rosen's point, that Benjamin's theory of ideas is developed in a highly idiosyncratic manner is already evident in "On the Coming Philosophy," and as Holz shows, is thoroughly demonstrated by Benjamin's letters written during the time of the essay's composition.[180] I believe that Rochlitz and Rosen, whose thoughts on the influence of German Romanticism on Benjamin are shared by many scholars, introduce an unnecessary dichotomy. I do not agree that we need to read Benjamin as *either* influenced by the Romantics *or* Kant and the Neokantians. Instead, as with regard to the ostensible impossibility of the co-existence of religious and materialist thought in Benjamin's work, I again resort to reading Benjamin as able to incorporate and sublate aspects of both influences. In the discussion that follows, which is focused especially on Kant and the Neokantians, I do not mean to perpetuate the notion that Benjamin was influenced by one tradition more than another. That is, I do not deny the impact of the Romantics, especially Schelling, and Novalis on his philosophy. My choice

---

[178] Rochlitz, *The Disenchantment of Art*, 34.
[179] Chalres Rosen, "The Ruins of Walter Benjamin," in *On Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Recollections*, ed. Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1988), 135.
[180] Holz, "Idee," 451 – 453; Heinrich Kaulen, "Rettung," in *Benjamins Begriffe*, vol. 2, ed. Michael Opitz and Erdmut Wizisla (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2000), 619-664.

of emphasis is primarily guided by the fact that his theory of the ideas, which I claim is central to understanding Benjamin's philosophy in general, and the role of the religious, specifically the "God-concept" in his epistemo-critical theory comes primarily via a critique of the Neokantians reading of Kant with Plato, rather than from the Romantics.[181] Thus, while I agree that Benjamin clearly distances himself in important ways from Kant and the Marburg Neokantians, I contend that their influence remains a constant force guiding his philosophy.

That Benjamin simply pretended to be a Kantian, or that the Kantian system had a negligible impact on his own philosophical development strikes me as textually insupportable. Some of Benjamin's central notions beyond the theory of rescue, such as origin (*Urpsrung*), for example, are taken from the works of Cohen, although certainly not without undergoing important changes. Another methodological concept Benjamin inherits from the Neokantians, one that is not too distantly related to the theory of rescue is that of the extreme. I agree with Wiesenthal that the concept of the extreme is an important but often overlooked aspect of Benjamin's philosophical method. On the surface it does not seem to bear any obvious relation to the thoughts of the Neokantians, but is in fact Benjamin's re-working of the Neokantian theory of the experiment, which, in turn, is predicated on a re-reading of Kant's conception of the idea from a (Neo)Platonic perspective.[182] If only for these reasons, I maintain that while Benjamin certainly developed his own philosophy and cannot be called a Neokantian in the sense

---

[181] Kaulen, "Rettung," 623.
[182] Wiesenthal, *Zur Wissenschaftstheorie Walter Benjamins*, 8 – 17.

that Ernst Cassirer might be, his philosophy is nonetheless deeply marked by the Marburg school's re-discovery of Kant and their re-reading of Plato with respect to a modern theory of ideas.

Beyond these examples it is worth noting that Benjamin not only reads and cites Cohen, Natorp and Cassirer, but was also a student of Heinrich Rickert, a leading Neokantian of the South-West German school. Even in his last letter to Adorno, Benjamin reminds his friend that, "As you know, I'm a former student of his [Rickert's]" (*SW4*, 418.) Rochlitz too is forced to admit that Benjamin had seriously considered writing a study on Kant at the time when he was embarking on his *Tragic Drama* book, which I take as evidence for more than a passing interest on his part in Transcendental Idealism.[183] Scholem recounts that upon his arrival at Benjamin's residence, the latter was eager to study the works of Cohen with him, following through on his intensive study of Kant.[184] Scholem notes that eventually Benjamin became disappointed with Cohen's philosophy. Nonetheless, taken in the context of the wealth of textual evidence, the centrality of Kantian and (Neo)Platonic themes, introduced through the Neokantians to his overall philosophy, cannot be denied. Perhaps then, we can agree with Pierfrancesco Fiorato's more carefully formulated assertion that Benjamin's relationship to the Marburg Neokantians is characterized by a complex "elective affinity."[185]

---

[183] Rochlitz, *The Disenchantment of Art*, 53.
[184] Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: Die Geschichte einer Freundschaft* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1975), 77.
[185] Pierfrancesco Fiorato, "Walter Benajmin als Leser von *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*" in *Hermann Cohen's Philosophy of Religion: International Conference in Jerusalem*

The gambit of "On the Coming Philosophy," is Benjamin's suggestion that a future philosophy (i.e., his future philosophy) needs to develop a notion of experience which "includes religion, as the true experience in which neither [G]od[186] nor man is object or subject of experience but in which this experience depends on pure knowledge as the quintessence of which philosophy alone can and must think [G]od" (*SW1*, 104; GS*2*, 163.)[187] As Rudolf Speth notes, Benjamin is suspicious of traditional epistemology. This suspicion accounts for the rather odd title of the Prologue to the *Tragic Drama*, "epistemo-*critical*,"[188] and is pivotal in identifying the role of the theological, specifically God-as-truth, in his philosophy. Benjamin does not believe that truth can be an object of knowledge. Yet, since knowledge is the proper domain of epistemology, the success of the gnoseological enterprise must remain limited. Benjamin states the essential problem as follows:

> It simply cannot be doubted that the notion, sublimated though it may be, of an individual living ego which receives sensations by means of its senses and forms its

---

1996, edited by Stéphane Moses and Hartwig Wiedebach (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1997), 72.

[186] The English translators have chosen to translate "god" with a lower case "g" in this passage. I believe this choice to be incorrect. Given that the arguments of this essay suggest that Benjamin is referencing the biblical God, and given the importance of the distinction between mythic pagan gods and the biblical monotheistic God to his philosophy, the choice to use a lower case "g" in the translation makes Benjamin's point unnecessarily obscure.

[187] "*Diese Erfahrung umfaßt denn auch die Religion, nämlich als die wahre, wobei weder Gott noch Mensch Objekt oder Subjekt der Erfahrung ist, wohl aber diese Erfahrung auf der reinen Erkenntnis beruht als deren Inbegriff allein die Philosophie Gott denken kann und muß.*"

[188] Rudolf Speth, *Wahrheit und Ästhetik : Untersuchungen zum Frühwerk Walter Benjamins* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1991), 232.

> ideas on the basis of them plays a role of the greatest importance in the Kantian concept of knowledge. This notion is, however, mythology, and so far as its truth content is concerned, it is the same as every other epistemological mythology. (*SW1*, 103; *GS2*, 161)[189]

Benjamin continues:

> The task of future epistemology is to find for knowledge the sphere of total neutrality in regard to the concepts of both subject and object; in other words, it is to discover the autonomous, innate sphere of knowledge in which this concept in no way continues to designate the relation between two metaphysical entities. (*SW1*, 104; *GS2*, 163)[190]

Thomas Weber argues that Benjamin needed to "purify" Kantian "epistemology" with respect to the concept of knowledge on the one hand, and experience on the other.[191] According to Benjamin, there are two central problems with the Kantian system. Benjamin writes:

---

[189] *"Es ist nämlich gar nicht zu bezweifeln daß in dem Kantischen Erkenntnisbegriff die wenn auch sublimierte Vorstellung eines individuellen leibgeistigen Ich welches mittelst der Sinne die Empfindungen empfängt und auf deren Grundlage sich seine Vorstellung bildet die größte Rolle spielt. Diese Vorstellung ist jedoch Mythologie und was ihren Wahrheitsgehalt angeht jeder andern Erkenntnismythologie gleichwertig."*

[190] *"Es ist die Aufgabe der kommenden Erkenntnistheorie für die Erkenntnis die Sphäre totaler Neutralität in Bezug auf die Begriffe Objekt und Subjekt zu finden; mit anderen Worten die autonome ureigne Sphäre der Erkenntnis auszumittelnin der dieser Begriff auf keine Weise mehr die Beziehung zwischen zwei metaphysischen Entitäten bezeichnet."*

[191] Thomas Weber, "Erfahrung," in *Benjamins Begriffe*, vol. 1, ed. Michael Opitz and Erdmut Wizisla (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2000):, 232-33. *"Philosophie soll wieder Erste Wissenschaft werden [...] Dazu beabsichtigt Benjamin eine 'Reinigung der Erkentnistheorie' Kants sowohl von seiten des Erfahrungs- als auch des Erkentnisbegriffs her."*

> The inadequacies with respect to experience and metaphysics manifest themselves within epistemology itself as elements of speculative metaphysics (that is, metaphysics that has become rudimentary). The most important of these elements are, first, Kant's conception of knowledge as a relation between some sort of subjects and objects or subject and object – a conception that he was unable, ultimately, to overcome, despite all his attempts to do so; and, second, the relation of knowledge and experience to human empirical consciousness, likewise only very tentatively overcome. (*SW1*, 103; *GS2*, 161)[192]

In the Addendum of the essay, Benjamin supplements the above with the following explanation:

> The original or primal concept of epistemology has a double function. On the one hand, this concept is the one which by its specification, after the general logical foundation of knowledge, penetrates to the concepts of specific types of cognition and thus to specific types of experience. This is its real epistemological significance and simultaneously the one weaker side of its metaphysical significance. However, the original and primal concept of knowledge does not reach a concrete totality of experience in this context, any more than it reaches a concept of existence. But there is a unity of experience that can by no means be

---

[192] "*Die Unzulänglichkeiten in Hinsicht auf Erfahrung und Metaphysik außern sich innerhalb der Erkenntnistheorie selbst als Elemente spekulativer (d.i. rudimentär gewordener) Metaphysik. Die wichtigsten dieser Elemente sind: erstens die bei Kant trotz aller Ansätze dazu nicht endgültig überwundene Auffassung der Erkenntnis als Beziehung zwischen irgendwelchen Subjekten und Objekten oder irdendwelchem Subjekt und Object; zweitens: die ebenfalls nur ganz ansatzweise überwundene Beziehung der Erkenntnis und der Erfahrung auf menschlich empirisches Bewußtsein.*"

> understood as a sum of experiences, to which the concept of knowledge as teaching [*Lehre*] is *immediately* related in its continuous development. The object and the content of this teaching, this concrete totality of experience, is religion, which, however, is present to philosophy in the first instance only as teaching. Yet the source of existence lies in the totality of experience, and only in teaching does philosophy encounter something absolute, as existence, and in so doing encounter that continuity in the nature of experience. This failing of neo-Kantianism can be suspected in its neglect of this continuity. (*SW1*, 109; *GS2*, 170)[193]

As these citations suggest, for Benjamin, the Kantian error resides in the uncritical reliance on the decidedly metaphysical supposition of a subject-object dualism. For Kant, the supposition that there exists a fundamental subject-object dualism, is the theoretical justification for wanting to rid experience of subjective biases. The real core of experience is what is encountered in the intuitions of the objective, after the subjective distortions have been subtracted. That is not to say that for Kant the categories

---

[193] "*Der erkenntnistheoretische Stamm- oder Urbegriff had eine doppelte Funktion. Einmal ist er es der durch seine Spezifikation, nach der allgemein logischen Begründung von Erkenntnis überhaupt zu den Begriffen von gesonderten Erkenntnisarten und damit zu besonderen Erfahrunsarten durchdringt. Dies ist seine eigentlich erkenntistheoretische Dedeutung und zugleich die eine, schwachere Seite seine metaphysischen Bedeutung. Jedoch kommt der Stamm- und Urbegriff der Erkenntnis in diesem Zusammenhang nicht zu einer konkreten Totalität der Erfahrung, ebensowenig zu irgen einem Begriff von Dasein. Es gibt aber eine Einheit der Erfahrung die keineswegs als Summe von Erfahrungen verstanden werden kann, auf die sich der Erkenntnisbegriff als Lehre in seiner kontinuierlichen Entfaltung* unmittelbar *bezieht. Der Gegesntand und Inhalt dieser Lehre, diese konkrete Totalität der Erfahrung ist die Religion, die aber der Philosophie zunächst nur als Lehre gegeben ist. Die Quelle des Daseins liegt nun aber in der Totalität der Erfahrung und erst in der Lehre stößt die Philosophie auf ein Absolutes, als Dasein, und damit auf jene Kontinuität im Wesen der Erfahrung in deren Vernachlässigung der Mangel des Neukantianismus zu vermuten ist.*"

contributed by the experiencing subject, such as relation, extension, and the *a priori* intuitions of time and space are meant to be subtracted, but rather, that these scientifically inspired categories comprise the truth of experience. Any extra, any subjective emotional dispositions, any intellectual biases and the like, are merely particularistic distortions that cloud the apprehension of reality. Benjamin, therefore, introduces an important corrective to the Kantian system, one already formulated by Hegel. In an ontology of internal relations, subject and object represent two moments of a dialectic interplay, not diametrically opposed autarkic entities.

According to Michael Bröcker, this desire to overcome a subject-object dualism represents the erotic moment in Benjamin's philosophical enterprise. Plato provides a helpful etiology of Eros in the *Symposium*, which articulates the philosophical impetus animating Benjamin's work. According to Plato, Zeus split human beings originally complete and conjoined, into separate entities that forever wander the world looking for their other half. Bröcker suggests that this striving for completion, for wholeness, is what leads humanity beyond itself and towards union with the Godhead.[194] It is the driving force animating Benjamin's dialectic. By transposing Kant's subject-object dualism into an ontology of internal relations, subject and object are seen as having been always already intimately related and co-determined by each other. This, of course, has the consequence of historicizing the Kantian universal abstract subject. The Kantian subject is no longer an atomistic element that remains unaffected by the social, but is seen as in

---

[194] Michael Bröker, "Sprache," in *Benjamins Begriffe*, vol. 2, ed. Michael Opitz and Erdmund Wizisla (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2000), 755.

part determined by the form of the social, the objective. The logical consequence of this could extend to historicizing the categories as well. That is, for Benjamin, experience is not composed of categories that are trans-historic, but the experiencing subject is conditioned by its socio-cultural particularity. It follows, then, that the concept of experience cannot be deduced in the abstract, but must be theorized with reference to the "objective" conditions of the social. Benjamin's critique of the Kantians' understanding of experience essentially follows this trajectory: he analyzes the changes in the social in order to determine the changes in the form of experience in modernity.

II – Diminished Experience

Benjamin's theory of experience[195] is more fully elaborated in a number of essays written after "On the Coming Philosophy." Even at this early juncture then, we need to read "On the Coming Philosophy" typologically, that is, in conjunction with subsequent writings, in order to see the principles that inform his still inchoate formulations.

---

[195] The English term "experience" fails to distinguish between the German concepts of *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*. As will be discussed presently, Benjamin argues that the two German terms refer to radically different encounters with the social. In the "Storyteller" essay, *Erfahrung* is translated as "long experience" and *Erlebnis* simply as experience. This approach is repeated in such essays as "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," and "Goethe's Elective Affinities." Although this distinction is not explicitly operative in "On the Coming Philosophy," Benjamin refers to a "higher" experience, "flat" experience, and "changes" to the concept of experience, suggesting that his later distinction is already at play in this early essay. Therefore, despite the fact that experience-as-*Erlebnis* and experience-as-*Erfahrung* is not distinguished in this text, I maintain that the difference between the two is relevant for gaining insight into Benjamin's intention. The distinction is also important in determining the place of religion in his theory of experience.

Collectively, these essays suggests that the structure of experience is undergoing momentous changes in modernity. Benjamin goes so far as to claim that certain types of experience have become less available to the modern subject. Evidence for this claim Benjamin finds in the works of Baudelaire and especially in the reception of his lyric poetry. For Benjamin, Baudelaire anticipated and embodied a new type of experience, particular to the modern, whose life, organized by the dictates of Capital, reduces traditional experience, *Erfahrung*, or "long-experience," as it is sometimes translated, to momentary and discrete fragments, experience-as-*Erlebnis*. Baudelaire's conceit was to be the last lyric poet in an age when lyric poetry could barely be understood. "Baudelaire envisaged readers to whom the reading of lyric poetry would present difficulties" (*SW4*, 313; *GS1*, 607.)[196] "Willpower and the ability to concentrate are not their [the moderns'] strong points," writes Benjamin (*SW4*, 313; *GS1*, 607.)[197] Benjamin attributes the unfavorable reception of lyric poetry in modernity, which he sees as one symptom of a larger process, to the fact that "only in rare instances does lyric poetry accord with the experience of its readers. This may be due," he writes, "to a change in the structure of their experience" (*SW4*, 314; *GS2*, 608.)[198] For Benjamin, the change in the structure of experience is mirrored in the rise of newspapers, which displace storytelling, in the rise of factory machine-based labour which displace pre-modern relations of production, and at

---

[196] "*Baudelaire hat mit Lesern gerechnet, die die Lektüre von Lyrik vor Schwierigkeiten stellt.*"

[197] "*Mit ihrer Willenskraft und also auch wohl ihrem Konzentrationsvermögen is es nicht weit her [....]*"

[198] "*Das könnte sein, weil sich deren Erfahrung in ihrer Struktur verändert hat.*"

the philosophical level, theorized in "On the Coming Philosophy," in the rise of scientistic determinations of experience that replace "metaphysical" accounts.

Indeed, when Benjamin theorizes the fate of storytelling and epic poetry in "Some Motifs on Baudelaire," "The Storyteller," and "Karl Krauss," when he examines the role of remembrance in "Proust," and *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, and when he analyzes the changes to experience in "On the Coming Philosophy," and in "Critique of Violence," he is in some sense tracing the same phenomenon: the consequences for subjectivity resulting from new modes of production that ultimately present the real as discrete, autarkic, atomistic and subjectivity as dominated, alienated and without agency. Newspapers chop up pre-modern wisdom into isolated facts just like the conveyor belt chops up the production process from one integrated into tradition to one dominated by repetitive, senseless movements. The underlying ontology of this new experience is given in the positivist representation of the universe as composed of dead matter, existing in external relations devoid of inherent meaning.

In "The Storyteller," Benjamin begins with a similar observation as in the Baudelaire essay, noting that the causes for the change in the structure of experience are to be found in changes manifested in the objective conditions of the social. "Beginning with the first World War," Benjamin notes, "a process became apparent which continues to this day. Wasn't it noticeable at the end of the war that men who returned from the battlefield had grown silent – not richer but poorer in communicable experience?" (*SW3*,

143; *GS2*, 439.)[199] Benjamin's phenomenology of experience is predicated on the traditionally Marxian assumption that there exists an essentially dialectic relationship between the mode of encounter with the manifold and the mode of production prevalent in society. The form that experience takes is related to the mode of production and this, in turn, produces a certain type of subjectivity. For Benjamin, the changes to the production processes that mark the European transition to Capital have dramatic consequences both for how the social is constituted, and also for how it is encountered. The conveyor belt not only produces new products; it also produces new subjects.

Essentially, Benjamin claims that experience-as-*Erlebnis* describes the mode of encounter for the modern in Capital. Experience-as-*Erlebnis* is the result of factory work, loud overwhelming cities, in which tradition is replaced by novelty, and wisdom by facts. Experience-as-*Erfahrung*, by contrast, is descriptive of the pre-modern's encounter with work in "traditional" conditions exemplified, if not also romanticized, by medieval European guild relations. A note of caution here: the contrast with the pre-modern should not be taken too literally. Benjamin is not theorizing the experience of any actually existing historical subject, living in medieval Europe, and contrasting this with the experiences of an actually existing modern subject. The fact that pre-modern work relations were often brutal and repressive, dominated by "mythic" worldviews, is a matter of historical record. I do not read Benjamin as naïvely suggesting a return to a pre-modern system of economic and social organization as a meaningful socio-political

---

[199] "*Mit dem Weltkrieg began ein Vorgang offenkundig zu werden, der seither nicht zum Stillstand gekommen ist. Hatte man nicht bei Kriegsende bemerkt, daß die Leute verstummt aus dem Felde kamen? Nicht reicher – ärmer an mitteilbarer Erfharung.*"

alternative to industrial Capital. Instead, the pre-modern in Benjamin's theories functions as a thought experiment, perhaps even a literary trope. It is another instance of Hamann's method of metaschematizing. Parallels to Benjamin's method abound. One example might be Hegel's "master-slave dialectic," another Freud's Oedipal myth. When discussing the Oedipal myth, Freud remained cautious and hesitant, insisting that "something of the kind may have happened," but not that it necessarily represented an actual onto- or phylogenetic event. Similarly, Benjamin's contrast between the modern and pre-modern is an attempt to exaggerate the newness of the modern condition. It is meant to highlight the changes that he believes have taken place in the structure of experience in response to changes in production and the organization of the social. Adorno's statement that "in psychoanalysis nothing is true except the exaggerations,"[200] could be generalized as a quasi-methodological principle of presentation in Benjamin's work when he constructs his highly artificial thought-images. In order for these thought-mages to have their intended effect, the actual conditions of the medieval peasant need to be bracketed. The contrast is not between the pre-modern and the modern, but between a hypostatized and abstracted component of the pre-modern's supposed experience, specifically experience as condition by the relations of production.

Benjamin elaborates the contrast between pre-modern and modern forms of experience by examining the change in the value of experience in modern factory work. As he notes, there are two shades of "long experience" (*Erfahrung*) the pre-modern brings

---

[200] Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005), 49.

to the work process: the experience of tradition, handed-down from master to apprentice, and experience developed through years of working in a given trade. Both of these forms of experience are necessary in the pre-modern productive process. At work, the pre-modern is saturated by practice and tradition. The work itself is the expression of this experience and, in turn, is the condition for experience-as-*Erfahrung*, that is experience as contextualized, coherent, meaningful. Benjamin explains, "Experience [*Erfahrung*] is indeed a matter of tradition, in collective existence as well as private life. It is the product less of facts firmly anchored in memory [*Erinnerung*] than of accumulated and frequently unconscious data that flow together in memory [*Gedächtnis*]" (*SW4*, 314; *GS1*, 608.)[201]

By contrast, in the modern productive process, typified by the factory assembly-line, experience in both the above senses counts for little. Whereas an apprentice in the workshop of his master might need years to acquire the traditional knowledge associated with his craft, and still many more years to become proficient at it, the modern factory worker can be easily and quickly integrated into the production process without requiring much, if any, prior training. Benjamin draws an analogy between the status of experience in the factory assembly-line and gambling. The factory worker in front of the machine is like the gambler for whom the experience of the previous turn of the roulette wheel has no bearing on the outcome of the current bet. For the factory worker as for the gambler,

---

[201] "*In der Tat ist die Erfahrung eine Sache der Tradition, im kollektiven wie im privaten Leben. Sie bildet sich weniger aus einzelnen in der Erinnerung streng fixierten Gegebenheiten denn aus Gehäuften, oft nicht bewußten Daten, die im Gedächtnis zusammenfließen.*"

time spent performing a task in the past has no relationship to the ability to perform the required duties in the present. For Benjamin, the diminished value of experience in production describes only one side of a larger phenomenon. Experience-as-*Erfahrung* is not necessary for factory work, but factory work produces a new, devalued form of experience: experience-as-*Erlebnis*.

Benjamin further theorizes the changes to the structure of experience by discussing two types of memory, each determined by the mode of encounter with the manifold. If modernity produces *Erlebnis* instead of *Erfahrung*, it is because the conditions of the modern social require subjects to develop fundamentally new psychic strategies for encountering, or, perhaps, more accurately, for coping with the real. Although Benjamin's theory of memory is based in large part on Bergson and Proust, it is helpful to begin this discussion with the psychoanalytic concept of shock because the modern form of experience-as-*Erlebnis*, and the memory most associated with it, are essentially attempts to reduce the trauma with which the modern social threatens the individual.

Shock is the prevailing response to the hostile manifestations of modernity: the factory, the crowd, the machine. "The shock experience which the passer-by has in the crowd corresponds to the isolated 'experiences' of the worker at his machine" (*SW4*, 329; *GS1*, 632.)[202] The subject is overwhelmed by the intensity of the objective, the density and strangeness of the crowd, the loudness of the factory, the incessant repetitive

---

[202] "*Dem Chockerlebnis, das der Passant in der Menge hat, entspricht das 'Erlebnis' des Arbeiters an der Maschinerie.*"

movements demanded by the machine. In the face of this traumatic exterior, the modern subject must use her psychic energy to defend her subjective integrity. Benjamin comments:

> The greater the shock factor in particular impressions, the more vigilant consciousness has to be in screening stimuli, the more efficiently it does so, the less these impressions enter long experience [*Erfahrung*] and the more they correspond to the concept of isolated experience [*Erlebnis*]. Perhaps the special achievement of shock defenses is the way it assigns an incident a precise point in time in consciousness, at the cost of integrity of the incident's contents. (*SW4*, 319; *GS1*, 615)[203]

As suggested above, a homology exists between this mode of consciousness and the emergence of newspapers, in that, similar to heightened consciousness, the newspaper "isolate[s] events from the realm [in] which they could affect the experience of the reader" (*SW4*, 315-316.)[204] Benjamin supposes that the encounter with the objective conditions of the social calls for specific types of consciousness, characterized by presence of mind and fragmentation of content. If the encounter with the manifold occurs in the constellation of shock, a heightened consciousness is required to parry the

---

[203] "*Je größer der Anteil des Chockmoments an den einzelnen Eindrücken ist, je unablessiger der Bewußtsein im Interesse des Reizschutzes auf dem Plan sein muß, je größer der Erfolg ist, mit dem es operiert, desto weniger gehen sie in die Erfahrung ein; desto eher erfüllen sie den Begriff des Erlebnisses. Vielleicht kann mann die eigentümliche Leistung der Chockabwehr zuletzt darin sehen: dem Vorfall auf Kosten der Integrität seines Inhalts eine exakte Zeitstelle im Bewußtsein anzuweisen.*"

[204] "[...] *die Ereignisse gegen den Bereich abzudichten, in dem sie die Erfarhung des Lesers betreffen* könnten."

traumatic intrusion. This psychic defense against the traumatic exterior, i.e., a heightened presence of mind, however, is acquired at the expense of the integrity of the experience, and this loss is registered in memory. In fact, the structure of shock and heightened consciousness resembles the structure of trauma, in which the event is often only "experienced" after the fact, in spastic repetitions, themselves disjointed.

Shock as the dominant mode of encounter with modernity is in part related to the subject-object reversal, noted also by Adorno, which typifies the production process under Capital.[205] There is perhaps no clearer depiction of this change in productive relations than in Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*, where the tramp is no more than an appendage of the assembly-line. Even after his shift on the conveyor belt is over, Chaplin's character continues to echo the machine's jerky movements to which he was forced to adapt. The discontinuity and rupture characteristic of modernity under the aegis of the machine is the objective counterpart to the subjective expression of this condition in which alienation is the mode of experience. As we saw above, the apogee of this new situation for Benjamin was the First World War.

Thomas Weber notes that it was the thoughts of Bergson that made Benjamin aware of the important link between experience and memory.[206] In *Matter and Memory*, Bergson writes, "In fact, there is no perception which is not full of memories,"[207] and "However brief we suppose any perception to be, it always occupies a certain duration,

---

[205] See Theodor W. Adorno, "Subject and Object," in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, ed. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (New York: The Continuum Publishing Group, 2005), 497 – 511.
[206] Weber, "Erfahrung."
[207] Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 33.

and involves, consequently, an effort of memory which prolongs, one into another, a plurality of moments."[208] Bergson argues that there is a sense in which what he terms a "pure" perception and memory overlap and interpenetrate each other, thereby generating the experience of a single event. Indeed, "These two acts, perception and recollection, always interpenetrate each other, are always exchanging something of their substance as by a process of endosmosis."[209] Memory provides the "subjective character" of the experience, what he calls the "spirit" of a perceptual event.[210] The key as to what type of memory arises is for Benjamin, again loosely following Bergson, determined by the objective. For Bergson, which specific memory arises to give the spirit of a perceptual event is a question of similarity, of affinity. Bergson posits a certain type of mimetic faculty in the process of recollection. The memories that arise are in some sense similar to the perception which caused them to be called up. Benjamin seems to develop this theory, suggesting that factory work, or the social conditions of Capital more generally, produce certain forms of experience, and these in turn call forth certain types of memories, memories particular and similar to the objective conditions.

It is not so much the specific content of the memory that establishes the basis of similarity to the objective, but its form. Benjamin posits two forms of memory that correspond to the differing forms of the social. As Thomas Weber again explains, Bergson distinguished between memory as *mémoire pure*, which is contemplative remembrance and motoric or somatic memory, a type of "bodily" memory trained

---

[208] Ibid., 34.
[209] Ibid., 67.
[210] Ibid., 73.

through repetitive movement.[211] Bergson notes, "The past survives under two distinct forms: first, in motor mechanism; secondly in independent recollections."[212] He continues:

> But then the practical, and, consequently, the usual function of memory, the utilizing of past experiences for the present action – recognition, in short – must take place in two different ways. Sometimes it lies in the action itself and in the automatic setting in motion of a mechanism adapted to the circumstances; at other times it implies an effort of the mind which seeks in the past, in order to apply them to the present, those representations which are best able to enter into the present situation.[213]

For Benjamin, it is the contemplative immersion in the detail alone, Bergson's *mémoire pure*, which can function as the alchemical medium powerful enough to transubstantiate the phenomenal flux of fragmentary *Erlebnis* into contextualized *Erfahrung*. Benjamin notes the structural affinities between immersive and motoric memory and the modes of production in modern and pre-modern society. On the assembly-line, the worker must employ primarily motoric memory. As Chaplin's *Modern Times* shows, the worker internalizes the movements of the machines to which he has become subjected.[214] By contrast, in the objective material domain the productive process of the pre-modern resembles the structure of immersive contemplative memory.

---

[211] Weber, "Erfahrung," 238.
[212] Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 78.
[213] Ibid., 78.
[214] Charles Chaplin, *Modern Times*, directed by Charles Chaplin, 1936.

Unlike the modern worker, who incessantly repeats a set of simplified and abstracted motions, the master craftsman approaches work by immersing himself in the work process.

A contrast to the relative psychic openness of the pre-modern worker is demonstrated by the practice of telling and listening to stories, which highlights the contrast Benjamin strives to articulate. In the old workshops of Benjamin's thought-image, where master and journeyman worked together, stories comprised the rhythm of pre-modern work and life. Like the pre-modern manufacturing process, these stories embedded the listener in a rich tapestry of tradition. The craftsmen recognized themselves in the products of their labour and in the stories they heard. In these workshops, the listener could open up to the stories that were being told. There is a certain "giving over" of oneself to the narrative. According to Benjamin, this openness allows the tales to sink into the listener and thereby forms a more stable and long-lasting memory. He cites Freud who notes that "vestiges of memory are 'often most powerful and most enduring when the incident which left them behind was one that never entered consciousness'" (*SW4*, 317; *GS1*, 612-613.)[215] Contrary to the heightened consciousness of the factory worker, who needs a presence of mind so as not to be swallowed up by machines, the pre-modern worker exhibits a degree of "dreaminess," in which stories and work happen somewhere beyond the domain of awareness. Immersive memory, however, cannot be produced when the worker is psychically preoccupied with the task of

---

[215] "*Erinnerungsreste sind vielmehr 'oft am stärksten und haltbarsten, wenn der sie zurücklassende Vorgang niemals zum Bewußtsein gekommen ist.'*"

parrying the shocks of a traumatic objective. This type of psychic environment is not productive of stories. The soldiers in Benjamin's "The Storyteller," who were struck silent by front warfare, represent merely the most extreme example of a process that he saw happening in the factories and cities across industrialized Europe.

Benjamin supplements Bergson's theory of memory with that of Proust. Proust, who himself relied on Bergson's distinction, was nonetheless critical of the voluntarism in Bergson's conception of *mémoire pure*, and developed his own conception of *mémoire involuntaire*. Proust's Madeleine episode demonstrates that there is a certain involuntary moment to memory, when a thought from the past strikes out from the unconscious without any premeditation. By siding with Proust against Bergson, Benjamin introduces the troubling problem of agency into his theory. For Benjamin, recollection is a critical, even revolutionary faculty. It is through the process of remembrance that a constellation arises in which formations of the social can be "exploded" out of the continuum of "homogeneous empty time." However, if the revolutionary dimension of memory is found in *memoire involuntaire*, then, just as the term indicates, a lack of agency seems implied in Benjamin's revolutionary politic.

I believe that the solution to this problem is to be found in the notion of recognition, discussed more fully in Chapter Three. In brief, however, while the revolutionary, perhaps revelatory, constellation produced through memory and experience is, to some extent involuntary, the recognition of the critical element is not. Recognition is a deliberate act accomplished by the agent, in bringing philosophy, particularly critique, to bear on its object. Critique, or the critical engagement and distance to the

objective, is the messianic moment in which truth can in some sense be glimpsed, if only briefly, and incompletely. Yet who exactly this agent might be is not explained. Sometimes Benjamin suggests it is the working class, while at other times this hypothetical agent seems to be more like an individual. I, again, read Benjamin here as making a logical rather than historical argument. Benjamin seems to suggest that something of this sort would need to happen, both at the level of the individual and at the level of social classes if a truly revolutionary politic were to succeed. Regrettably though, Benjamin does not theorize his notion of agency and subjectivity enough to make a firm statement on this point. Nonetheless, relevant for the present argument is the claim that despite the involuntary moment implied in Proust's formulation, there is still a need for an active conscious agent, be that an individual or a class, capable of recognizing the revolutionary-revelatory constellation for what it is.

As was intimated above, Benjamin finds that the distinction between the two modes of experience and the two types of memory are also expressed in modern philosophies that are formulated as Capital becomes dominant. In, "On the Coming Philosophy," Benjamin suggests that Kant and the Neokantians did not theorize experience as such, but only experience-as-*Erlebnis*. Benjamin muses that perhaps experience-as-*Erlebnis* was already the only form of experience available to Kant and his intellectual heirs: indeed, according to Benjamin, Kant and the Neokantians provide the philosophical apology for the new form of experience, in which the meaning-making aspects of human life are excluded from analysis. For Benjamin, however, the future

philosophy is one in which the concept of experience-as-*Erfahrung* needs to be (re-)developed such that is also allows for religious and metaphysical experiences.

III – Benjamin's Critique of Kant and the Neokantians

It may seem rather audacious of Benjamin to suggest that religion of all things should be re-introduced into a philosophy based on a Kantian typology, given that it is perhaps the defining feature of Kant's three *Critiques*, to set limits on what reason can discover. Kant specifically excludes traditional metaphysics, and especially religious metaphysics from his field of inquiry. It will be recalled that in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and, shortly thereafter, in *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, Kant had argued that knowledge of what is traditionally understood by metaphysics is by definition impossible. For Kant, speculating on questions such as the existence or non-existence of God or the immortality of the soul, is akin to counting the sides of square circles. While Kant recognizes that these questions are of abiding interest, perhaps even the motivating force behind the philosophical venture, he, nonetheless, argues that no matter how elegant the theory, no *knowledge* could be gained from metaphysical speculation, since it is not grounded by any empirical datum of experience. "Metaphysics has been a mere groping, and what is worse a groping among mere concepts."[216] Kant, who was living in the midst of the scientific revolution, was perturbed by the fact that, unlike Newtonian physics, the history of metaphysics had not shown any significant signs of progress, even though it is

[216] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), B xiii.

"older than all other science."[217] The recognition that metaphysics entails a constant "retracing of our steps" led Kant to attempt to recast the entire intellectual endeavor along scientific lines: he wanted to turn metaphysics and philosophy in general into a science.

To establish philosophy as the equal of science, to assure it has the same explanatory power, Kant looked to the method of the scientists, specifically Galileo and Newton.[218] Taking his cue from how he believed scientists arrive at their conclusions, Kant yoked knowledge to experience. In perhaps the most quoted line of the first *Critique*, Kant wrote that "Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind."[219] As his Transcendental Idealism implies, the term "content" clearly refers to empirical experience. Of course, this claim must be understood in the limited sense in which Kant meant it, since his entire system is dedicated to arguing that neither an encounter with the sensory manifold, nor the cogitating mind, are in and of themselves sufficient to account for the existence of experience and knowledge.[220] One of the enduring insights of the first *Critique* is in having found a middle ground between the seemingly intractable one-sidedness of empiricist and rationalist positions, by claiming that both the mind and the sensory manifold make essential contributions, which are

---

[217] Ibid., B xv.
[218] This is not to imply that Kant developed naïve scientistic philosophy predicated on Newtonian physics. There are significant differences between the two thinkers, shown best by their differing views on the nature of space. For Newton, space is an empty container *in* which things exist. For Kant, space is a transcendental category necessary for knowledge, but its ontic status must remain a mystery. The Newtonian influence on Kant is a methodological one. It has less bearing on specific content.
[219] Ibid., A 51, B 75.
[220] Ibid., B 127 – B 129.

necessary for experience and knowledge to arise.[221] In the final analysis Kant agrees with the rationalist position that the mind helps to determine what enters into the field of knowledge, but he also affirms the Humean-empiricists moment that all actual knowledge is fundamentally dependent on an encounter with the sensory manifold, that is on experience. The result of Kant's meticulous investigation into the justification of knowledge is to exclude metaphysics almost entirely. Since metaphysics is, by definition, never a datum of sensory experience, it cannot become known.

In point of fact, as Benjamin himself notes, Kant did not deny the possibility of metaphysics entirely, but merely wanted to establish the criteria for its legitimation.[222] This point notwithstanding, the driving force motivating Kant's Transcendental Idealism, as Benjamin rightly claims, is a desire to establish experience and knowledge on certainty, the kind of certainty Kant thought the physical sciences had achieved. This desire led Kant to limit what can be known to what can be experienced, and what can be experienced is determined by the *a priori* intuitions of time and space, the concepts of the understanding and the categories of judgment. The *a priori* intuitions, the concepts and the categories themselves express only a bare minimum of the encounter with the world. However, as other commentators besides Benjamin have noted, foremost among them the

---

[221] I am indebted to J.M. Berstein for this formulation. See J. M. Bernstein, "The Berstein Tapes," *bernsteintapes.com/*, 2006, http://www.bernsteintapes.com/ (accessed 07 17, 2012).

[222] Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics That Will be Able to Come Forward as Science with Selections from the Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. and trans. Garry Hatfield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Kant argues that mathematics, being the only synthetic *a priori* form of knowledge is therefore also the only legitimate form metaphysics can take.

Marburg school, Kant's radical reduction results in limiting experience to what can be broadly defined as "scientific experience." It is this reduction that the Marburg Neokantians believe is the most valuable insight of Kant's philosophy.[223] According to the Neokantians, the scientific comprises the real core of experience; it expresses Whitehead's "really real." However, as was suggested above, for Benjamin this radical reduction of experience to scientific experience is a symptom of the historical situation. It merely articulates philosophically the diminished status of experience in modernity.

In "On the Coming Philosophy," the determination of truth in relation to knowledge and experience is the major fault line separating Benjamin's thought from that of the Marburg Neokantians. If Kant had wanted to reduce knowledge to what could be scientifically verified in experience, and if the Marburg school was suggesting that the scientifically verifiable core is the truth of that experience, then truth itself can be known. The Neokantians diverge from Kant on the question of truth in a subtle but, nonetheless, significant manner. Whereas for Kant, a certain truth inheres in the noumenal *Ding-an-sich*, the Neokantians, as will be demonstrated below, essentially do away with the noumenal realm, and see the truth content as residing exclusively in the scientifically verifiable essence of experience. If the truth of an experience is the experience of its mathematical-scientific essence, then it follows that it can also be expressed in mathematical formulae or in philosophical speech acts that conform, as closely as

---

[223] Jürgen Mittelstrass, *Die Rettung der Phänomene: Ursprung und Geschichte eines antiken Forschungsprinzips* (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter & Co., 1962), 17.

possible, to mathematical exactitude.[224] Perhaps this line of reasoning partially accounts for the privileged place of mathematics and physics as paragons of truth in positivism, since for the positivists mathematical physics is uniquely positioned to express the truly real in experience, being unencumbered by the "delusions" that subjective particularity tends to be burdened with.

Benjamin, however, sees this differently. Whereas the Neokantians read Kant as arguing that the truth of an experience is found in a reduction of the concept of experience to the scientifically verifiable, for Benjamin, truth is utterly transcendent. "Truth, bodied forth in the dance of represented ideas, *resists being projected, by whatever means, into the realm of knowledge*" (*Tragic Drama* 29-30; *SW1*, 209; emphasis added.)[225] In his notes, which as yet remain untranslated into English, Benjamin elaborates the distinction between truth and knowledge as follows, "Knowledge and truth are never identical; there is no true knowledge and there is no known truth."[226] According to Benjamin, the Neokantian equation of truth with knowledge excludes religion, especially the biblical God, from the field of experience. As Kant makes clear in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (the biblical) God cannot be known through experience, and, therefore, traditional metaphysics which attempts to theorize "the mind of God" is a vacuous enterprise. On this point, Benjamin and Kant agree: God cannot be known. For the Neokantians, however, this means that God exists beyond the horizon of truth, since truth and

---

[224] Mittelstrass, *Die Rettung der Phänomene*, 23.
[225] "*Die Wahrheit, vergegenwärtigt im Reigen der Dergestellten Ideen, entgeht jeder wie immer gearteten Projektion in den Erkenntnisbereich.*"
[226] "*Erkenntnis und Wahrheit sind niemals identisch; es gibt keine wahre Erkenntnis und keine erkannte Wahrheit*"

knowledge are dependent on experience. Benjamin draws a different conclusion: that God cannot be known means that truth itself cannot be known, which is to say that truth exists beyond the horizon of knowledge. For Benjamin, the Neokantians theorize within the horizon of knowledge, which is distinct from truth, while one might imagine that for Kant, Benjamin verges dangerously close to falling back into a metaphysical mode of thinking.

It is interesting on this point to note that Kant entirely rejects a Durkheimian conception of religion. In *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, for example, Kant follows Augustine in drawing a clear distinction between what he terms the true religion on the one hand, and cultic actions on the other. "All religions," writes Kant, "can be divided into religion of rogation (of mere cult) and moral religion, i.e., the religion of good life conduct."[227] For Kant the latter, the moral religion, is the only true religion, and is represented by "[...] Christianity alone."[228] The true religion rests solely on reason, on the moral law, which is itself not given in experience, but is deducible from reason itself. Although Jesus for Kant is the prototype of a morally perfect being, he nonetheless claims that "there is no need [...] of any example from experience to make the idea of a human being morally pleasing to God a model to us; the idea is present as a model already in our reason."[229] In Kant's deistic, rationalist definition of religion, in which the social-symbolic function of the cult is entirely denied, and in his reduction of

---

[227] Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason and other Writings*, ed. and trans. Allen Wood and George Di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 6:51.
[228] Ibid., 6:52.
[229] Ibid., 6:62-6:63.

religious experience to the moral law where all the narrative, and experiential or "mystical" elements are stripped away, one could argue that human meaning itself is lost, because the meaning generating function, that is the symbolic nexus that ritual establishes, is repressed. Benjamin writes that "The reality with which, and with the knowledge of which, Kant wanted to base knowledge on certainty and truth is a reality of a low, perhaps the lowest, order" (*SW1*, 101; *GS2*, 158.)[230]

IV – Benjamin's Ideas

Benjamin's critique of the Kantians in "On the Coming Philosophy," therefore is two-fold. His first argument, or better, his first "sketchy indication" suggests that he sees what is usually meant by the concept experience as reaching far beyond what the Neokantians believed was its essence. His second objection is that he does not believe Kant had been radical enough in purifying his epistemic concepts of metaphysics, and that a "latent and infertile metaphysics," i.e., a subject-object dualism, actually lay at the basis of the Kantian system. With respect to this second critique, Benjamin objects to Kant's two-world theory, in which a noumenal unknown is posited but which itself cannot be experienced: all knowledge is generated by a something-out-there but that very something argues Kant must remain a mystery. This, Benjamin suggests is in itself a metaphysical claim.

---

[230] "[...] *diejenige Wirklichkeit deren Erkenntnis und mit der er [Kant] die Erkenntnis auf Gewißheit und Wahrheit gründen wollte, ist eine Wirklichkeit nidern, vielleicht niedersten Ranges.*"

With these two "arguments" Benjamin simultaneously moves close to the Marburg critique of Kant and away from it: Benjamin, like the Marburg Neokantians, is troubled by Kant's two irreconcilable sources of knowledge, but he does not accept the Marburgers' appraisal to the effect that the concept of experience should be equated with scientific experience. Benjamin, I suggest, agrees with the Marburg school's assessment that the irreconcilability of the two-world theory in Kant remains problematic (*SW1,* 104; *GS2,* 163) – what, in light of the Neokantians reading of Plato might be termed Kant's "*methexis* problem." He also follows the Neokantians in their suggestion that the theory of rescue is a solution to this difficulty. That is, Benjamin is in agreement when they argue that the notion of rescue can help solve the problem of how the noumenal realm relates to the phenomenal realm in Kant's Transcendental Idealism. This problem structurally parallels the problem in Platonic philosophy of how the ideal forms are related to the objects in the empirical world that supposedly "reflect" them. Not only is rescue of the phenomena a solution to the two-world conundrum that exists in both Platonism and Kantianism, it is also Benjamin's recourse to a certain nominalism. In fact, it was Plato's Socrates, who in the *Parmenides* first suggested a nominalist strategy to deal with the problem of how the forms might be related to their phenomenal objects, although he did not develop the specific theory of rescue.[231] The theory of rescue will be examined in Chapter Three where I analyze Benjamin's philosophical method derived from considerations presently under investigation. Since his theory of rescue and his

---

[231] Plato, *Parmenides*, trans. Mary Louise Gill and Paul Rayn (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1996).

insistence that God as truth is beyond knowledge, both rely on his theory of the ideas, it is to an investigation of this theory to which we turn first.

Benjamin writes that "ideas are to things as constellations are to stars" (*Tragic Drama*, 34; *SW1*, 214.)[232] Unfortunately, there is some ambiguity implied in the English translation of this phrase that I believe has resulted in some readers mistakenly conflating Benjamin's notion of ideas with either the Kantian notion of concepts or intuitions. There are in fact three moments to the constellation, which, I maintain, Benjamin means to map onto the Kantian philosophical triad of intuition, concept and idea. These three moments are: (i) the empirical stars that make up the constellation, (ii) the assembly of certain stars into simple geometrical groupings based on their apparent proximity to one another, (iii) and finally the mostly mythological figures to which these star-groupings are meant to refer. It is this last moment of the constellation, the narrative referent, and not the second moment of the grouping of empirical objects, that Benjamin is referring to, when he claims that ideas are to things as constellations are to stars. That is, ideas are to intuitions as the mythological referents are to the physical existence of individual stars in a constellation.

To continue Benjamin's metaphor, the empirical manifold can be equated with the individual stars of the night sky. They are the ontic objects of the noumenal realm that exist "out there" in the world. These stars can be conceptually organized into groups, into constellations. The constellations indicate the role of the concept, which has an analytic

---

[232] Speth, *Wahrheit und Ästhetik*. "*Die Ideen verhalten sich zu den Dingen wie die Sternbilder zu den Sternen.*" My translation: "Ideas relate to things as stars to constellations."

as well as a synthetic function. Benjamin will call the analytic, the "destructive" moment of the concept. Its function is to break up the whole, the "false unity" of the night sky. At the same time, however, the concept draws stars together synthesizing them into a new whole, an actual unity.[233] Benjamin writes, "The scientist arranges the world with a view to its dispersal in the realm of ideas, by dividing it from within into concepts" (*Tragic Drama*, 32; *GS1*, 212.)[234] And further:

> Phenomena do not [...] enter into the realm of the ideas whole, in their crude empirical state, adulterated by appearances, but only in their basic elements, redeemed. They are divested of their false unity so that, thus divided, they might partake of the genuine unity of truth. In this their division, phenomena are subordinated to concepts, for it is the latter which effect their solution of objects into their constituent elements. Conceptual distinctions are above all suspicion of destructive sophistry only when their purpose is the salvation of phenomena in ideas [....] (*Tragic Drama*, 33; *SW1*, 213-214)[235]

Through the concept, the empirical is organized into relationships that define how the empirical manifold relate to each other, how the stars are grouped. The idea, however, is

---

[233] Speth, *Wahrheit und Ästhetik*, 239.

[234] "*Der Forscher disponiert die Welt zu der Zersteuung im Bereiche der Idee, indem er sie von innen im Begriffe aufteilt.*"

[235] "*Die Phänomene gehen aber nicht integral in ihrem rohen empirischen Bestande, dem der Schein sich beimischt, sondern in ihrer Elementen allein, gerretet, in das Reich der Ideen ein. Ihrer falschen Einheit entäußern sie sich, um aufgeteilt an der echten der Wahrheit teilzuhaben. In dieser ihrer Aufteilung unterstehen die Phänomene den Begriffen. Die sind es, welche an den Dingen die Lösung in die Elemente vollziehen. Die Unterscheidung in Begriffen ist über jedweden Verdacht zerstörerischer Spitzfindigkeit erhaben nur dort, wo sie auf jene Bergung der Phänomene in den Ideen* [...] *es abgesehen hat.* "

not actually given, either in the empirical, or in the given's relationship with other empirical elements. In terms of the empirically given, the idea is extra; it is surplus; it is meaning. Cohen suggests that the idea is the concept's self-consiousness.[236] The idea is that which the concept references; it is that which the constellation itself is meant to represent, it is the bull in Taurus; it is the bear in Ursa Major.

> Whereas the concept is a spontaneous product of the intellect, ideas are simply given to be reflected upon. Ideas are pre-existent. The distinction between truth and coherence provided by knowledge thus defines idea as essence. Such is the implication of the theory of ideas for the concept of truth. As essence truth and ideas acquire that supreme metaphysical significance expressly attributed to them by Plato. (*Tragic Drama*, 30; *SW1*, 214-215)[237]

In *Die Grundlosigkeit der Wahrheit,* however, Bröker notes that for Benjamin the relationship of phenomenon to concept is not homologous to the relationship of concept to idea. While each concept is made up of a multitude of intuitions, and each idea of a number of concepts, the elements that comprise the concept share a certain similarity by virtue of which they are subordinated under one notion, but there is no necessary conceptual unity among the concepts that comprise an idea, or, for that matter, the

---

[236] Hermann Cohen, *Logik der Reinen Erkenntnis* (Berlin: Bruno Cassirer Verlag, 1922), 15: "*Die Idee dagegen ist das Selbstbewußtsein des Begriffs.*"

[237] "*Während der Begriff aus der Spontaneität des Verstandes hervorgeht, sind die Ideen der Betrachtung gegeben. Die Ideen sind Vorgegebe. So definiert die Sonderung der Wahrheit von dem Zusammenhange des Erkennens die Idee als Sein. Das ist die Tragweite der Ideenlehre für den Wahrheitsbegriff. Als Sein gewinnen Warheit und Idee jene höchste metaphysische Bedeutung, die das Platonische System ihnen nachdrücklich zuspricht.*"

relationship between the ideas and truth.[238] Benjamin's metaphor of the mosaic is helpful in this regard. With the mosaic, Benjamin suggests that concepts have a similar relationship to ideas, as the fragmentary mosaic pieces do to the picture that finally emerges from them. Benjamin writes:

> Just as mosaics preserve their majesty despite their fragmentation into capricious particles, so philosophical contemplation is not lacking in momentum. Both are made up of the distinct and the disparate; and nothing could bear more powerful testimony to the transcendent force of the sacred image and the truth itself. The value of fragments of thought is all the greater the less direct their relationship to the underlying idea, and the brilliance of the representation depends as much on this value as the relationship between the minute precision of the work and the proportions of the sculptural or intellectual whole demonstrates that truth-content is only to be grasped through immersion in the most minute details of the subject-matter." (*Tragic Drama*, 28-29; *SW1*, 208)[239]

This metaphor of the mosaic suggests an important difference between the Platonic and Benjaminian theory of ideas. Unlike for Plato and perhaps the Neoplatonists, for

---

[238] Michael Bröcker, *Die Grundlosigkeit der Wahrheit: zum Verhältnis von Sprache, Geschichte und Theologie bei Walter Benjamin* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1993), 218.

[239] "*Der Wert von Denkbruchstücken ist um so entscheidender, je minder sie unmittelbar an der Grundkonzeption sich zu messen vermögen und von ihm hängt der Glanz der Darstellung im gleichen Maße ab, wie der des Mosaiks von der Qualität des Glasflusses. Die Relation der mikrologischen Verarbeitung zum Maß des bildnerischen und des intellektuellen Ganzen spricht es aus, wie der Wahrheitsgehalt nur bei genauester Versenkung in die Einzelheiten eines Sachgehlts sich fassen läßt.*"

Benjamin the idea takes the form of an image.[240] The mosaic's image is the idea; it is that which the concepts together create. The image-as-idea is the basis for Benjamin's method of creating thought-images, of metaschematizing. It is the elementary building block of his method of philosophical critique.

The ideas, for Benjamin, are not truth itself, however, but a way of gesturing towards it. Here, Benjamin's account of the legend of the stones of the Sinai might be helpful to highlight this relationship. My translation of Benjamin's explanation follows:

> [The legend is about] stones which cover the Sinai. As Salmon Maimon recounts it, these stones carried an imprint of a leaf (or tree) the unique nature of which was to immediately duplicate itself into infinity on each stone that was broken from the larger rock. (*GS1*, 934)[241]

Like these stones, each of which replicates the original information on its constituent parts when broken into smaller pieces, each concept contains the imprint or information of the idea, and each idea the essential unity from which it came.[242] A contemporary analogy might be the mathematical fractal, which duplicates its essential geometric pattern at each order of magnitude. Unlike the fractal, however, which replicates its basic shape, the stone that is broken off from the larger piece need not bear any obvious

---

[240] "*Die Idee selbst jedoch ist nicht Theorie, sondern Bild.*" My translation: "The idea itself, however, is not theory but image." Liselotte Wiesenthal, *Zur Wissenschaftstheorie Walter Benjamins* (Frankfurt a.M.: Athenäum Verlag GmbH, 1973), 129.

[241] The original German reads: "*Sie handelt von den Steinen, welche den Sinai bedecken. Diese trügen, wie Salomon Maimon berichtet, die Zeichnung eines Blattes (Baumes) eingeprägt, deren sonderbare Natur es sei, alsbald auf jedem Steinstück sich herzustellen, welches abgesprengt von einem großen Blocke sei und so ins Unendliche fort.*"

[242] Bröcker, *Die Grundlosigkeit der Wahrheit*, 218.

outward relation to the original rock. Similarly, the mythic referents of the constellations Aries and Cassiopeia, for instance, share no obvious relation with one another. Yet, both constellations are imprinted with the worldview, the culture from which they arose. Aries is no less part of the Greco-Roman pantheon than is Cassiopeia.

In Benjamin's fable we can hear the intimations of a further transformation of the Platonic-Kantian theory of the ideas, not inherited from the Neokantians directly, but from a later "Neoplatonist," namely G. W. Leibniz.[243] According to Speth, it was Benjamin's close friend, the protestant theologian Florens Christian Rang, who first recommended Leibniz to him.[244] Benjamin later wrote to Rang that, "Leibniz's entire way of thinking, his idea of the monad, which I adopt for my definition of ideas [...] seems to comprise the summa of a theory of ideas" (*SW1*, 389.) Textual references to Leibniz's philosophy can be found in some of Benjamin's most important pieces, including the "Epistemo-Critical Prologue" of the *Tragic Drama*, the *Arcades Project*, and later in the "Theses on the Concept of History." Benjamin's notion of the idea is similar to Leibniz's notion of the monad in that it is a representation of totality. In the

---

[243] I argue that Benjamin's (re-)interpretation of Leibniz' spiritual atomism is not necessarily in conflict with an ontology of internal relations. Admittedly, Leibniz argues that the actual structure of reality is atomistic, that, in reality there are only discrete monads which are related to one another by the divine intercession of God. Benjamin, however, applies the monadology to his theory of ideas. He does not maintain that it articulates an ontological essence. In so far as the monad can be equated with the idea, in so far as it is a theory of ideas, it implies a relational ontology since, as both Leibniz and Benjamin aver, the monad, or the idea, represents the whole. Therefore, one can reach any other idea folded within it through an analytical operation of disentanglement. Benjamin seems to suggest that any idea contains a reference to truth within itself, that the universe is encapsulated in a representation.

[244] Speth, *Wahrheit und Ästhetik*, 249.

Tragic Drama, Benjamin elaborates, "The idea is a monad – that means briefly: every idea contains the image of the world. The purpose of the representation of the idea is nothing less than an abbreviated outline of this image of the world" (*Tragic Drama*, 48; *GS1*, 228.)[245] I paraphrase Wiesenthal who notes that for Benjamin the monad represents a hermetically sealed model of the universe similar to the architect's blueprint, which depicts the idea of a building. In this sense the monad is a model of the universe.[246] As Holtz notes, the Leibnizian influence on Benjamin's theory of ideas also furnishes another indication of how his theory differs from Plato's, which, ultimately served as the basis of its Neokantian iteration. In Holtz's reading Plato envisioned an ontic realm in which the ideas actually exist.[247] However, as Bröker, argues, there is no discrete realm of ideas for Benjamin.[248] Instead, for Benjamin, argues Holz, the ideas function more in Leibniz's sense of an *ars combinatoria*, they are the building blocks of a grammar of human thought. This thought, however, crystallizes in images not narratives.

---

[245] "*Die Idee ist Monade – das heißt in Kürze: jede Idee enthält das Bild der Welt. Ihrer Darstellung ist zur Aufgabe nichts Geringeres gesetzt, als dieses Bild der Welt in seiner Verkürzung zu zeichnen.*"

[246] Wiesenthal, *Zur Wissenschaftstheorie Walter Benjamins*, 43: "*In dieser Metapher wird deutlich, das die Monade ein in sich geschlosenes strukturmodell des Universums ist. Wie in den Plänen des Archikekten die Idee eines Baus nach Maß und Ordnung dargestellt ist, so stellt die Monade ein Modell des Universums dar.*" My translation: "It becomes clear in this metaphor that the monad represents a structural model of the universe. Just as in the idea of a building is presented according to size and organization in the floor plans of the architect, so too is the universe represented in the monad."

[247] Holz, "Idee," 465.

[248] Bröcker, *Die Grundlosigkeit der Wahrheit*, 220.

V – The Transcendence of Truth

As Speth notes, truth in Benjamin's philosophy is not synonymous with the realm of ideas but is above the ideas.[249] In *Tragic Drama*, Benjamin claims that, "Truth is an intentionless state of being, made up of ideas"[250] (*Tragic Drama, 36; GS1*, 216.) In the *Nachlass*, Benjamin notes that truth belongs to a "higher order" (*GS1*, 929),[251] and in "On the Coming Philosophy," Benjamin further distances the ideas from truth when he explains that the value of metaphysics lies in being able to "tie all of experience immediately to the concept of God, *through* ideas" (*SW1*, 105; *GS2*, 164; emphasis added.)[252] I believe that it is in Benjamin's insistence that the ideas are dependent on another, higher principle, that we start to detect the influence of the Neoplatonic readings of Plato on Benjamin's thought, especially that of Augustine.

Although Augustine was a late member of the Christian Neoplatonic tradition, and many of his ideas can already be found in Origen's thought, much of Origen's works have been lost, and the synthesis between biblical and Platonic philosophico-theologies, which were only in their infancy in his extant works, are more fully developed in the writings of Augustine. It is Augustine, therefore, who is our reference point in this discussion of a biblical Neoplatonism that finds its way into Benjamin's philosophy.

---

[249] Speth, *Wahrheit und Ästhetik*, 232-33.
[250] "*Die Wahrheit ist ein aus Ideen gebildetes intentionsloses Sein.*"
[251] The full German passage reads: "*Der Mensch ist schön für den Liebenden, an sich ist er es nicht. Und zwar deswegen, weil an sich sein Leib in einer höheren Ordnung als der des Schönen sich darstellet. So auch die Wahrheit.*"
[252] "[…] *die gesamte Erfahrung mit dem Gottesbegriff durch Ideen unmittelbar verknüpfen.*"

In his *Confessions*, Augustine clearly associates God with truth.[253] Addressing himself to God, Augustine asks, "What then am I to say, my Light, my Truth?"[254] Although Augustine understood himself as theorizing within a Platonic paradigm, he actually introduced some decidedly un-Platonic themes, inherited from the Christian tradition. The most conspicuous example of this is the notion of *creatio ex nihilo*, which was totally foreign to the classical Greek imaginary.[255] The other important innovation that Augustine inherited from Origen and Plotinus, among other Neoplatonists, and which marks his Platonism as distinctive from that of Plato, is the notion that the ideas are dependent upon a higher realm, that they are thoughts in the mind of God. As do many other Neoplatonists, Augustine reads Plato as foreshadowing these themes. Although Augustine would not have had direct access to Plato's *Republic*, a citation from this text is often referenced as the point of departure for Neoplatonists like Origen and Plotinus in coming to the notion that the ideas are "in" the mind of God.

In book six of the *Republic*, Plato develops the well-known metaphor of the sun, which might be read by a Christian philosopher-theologian, like Origen, as suggesting that the realm of the forms is dependent upon a higher entity. The good, intimates Plato, is not a form, or the entire realm of forms in the same way that the sun is not that which it

---

[253] Cf. Origen, "On First Principles," 206. The fact that Augustine's equation of truth and God has precedence in the Neoplatonic tradition is evinced by Origen, when he writes, for example, "For that would be no different from saying that there was a time when truth was not, when wisdome was not, when life was not, since it should be judged that the substance of God the Father involves all of these things. They cannot be separated from Him, nor can they ever be cut off from His substance."

[254] Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin Books, 1961), 335.

[255] Mittelstrass, *Die Rettung der Phänomene*.

illuminates. "The good therefore may be said to be the source not only of the intelligibility of the objects of knowledge, but also of their being and reality yet it is not itself that reality but is beyond it, and superior to it in dignity and power."[256] That is, the ideas in an Augustinian Neoplatonic idiom are the forms, which are illuminated by the sun, which itself is "above" the forms. As Bröker notes, God in Benjamin's work is not the unity of the ideas, but utterly transcends the ideas.[257] This, I suggest is Benjamin's Neoplatonic move. Like Augustine, following Origen and Plotinus, Benjamin too suggests that the realm of ideas is dependent upon something higher. Like Plato, Benjamin recognizes the transcendent nature of truth and beauty, but in his philosophy these concepts function as virtual synonyms for the ultimate epistemic signifier, which is expressed explicitly only in a few works, but hovers in the background of every piece he writes. Like Augustine, Benjamin ultimately recognizes the transcendent something as God. As Bröker, I think correctly remarks, Benjamin's God is beyond the ideas, having neither substance nor being.[258] That Benjamin regards the ideas as dependent on God is also suggested by his reference to Leibniz's "Monadology." Leibniz echoes Plotinus by suggesting that the monads are "in the thoughts of God." In this sense, Plato's illuminating sun can be read Neoplatonically, as it were, as something other than the realm of ideas, something one comes to *through* the ideas, indeed, something that itself makes the ideas possible. If the ideas are components of Benjamin's epistemo-critical

---

[256] Plato, *The Republic*, 2nd Edition, trans. Desmond Lee (London: Penguin Books, 1974), 509 b-c.
[257] Bröcker, *Die Grundlosigkeit der Wahrheit*, 224.
[258] Ibid., 211.

method, which is meant to reveal the truth in phenomena, the truth discovered is not the idea itself, but the "really real," the relational essence, to which the ideas themselves refer. Through the ideas one comes to God, and God is not an ontological autarkic existent but, as Holtz puts it, a "metasemantic regulative function."[259]

Benjamin's notion of God is closer to that of a biblical Neoplatonism than of a more literalist interpretation of an interventionist God. Benjamin's God is the "philosopher's God" of Origen, Plotinus and Augustine. His God certainly shares affinities with that of Christianity *and* Jewish mysticism, but only if these traditions are given a non-literal reading: the God of biblical "wisdom literature." That is, unlike the biblical God in more literalist (particularly contemporary fundamentalist) interpretations, who is taken to be a personal agent, walking in the Garden of Eden talking to his creation[260] or who stops the sun's path across the sky for Joshua,[261] a God, incidentally which is often the only one allowed by some less generous (often positivist Marxist) reader's of Benjamin, the God in Benjamin's work is impersonal, the ultimate source of meaning, and at the same time fundamentally inexpressible. Although Benjamin gives an exegesis of the second creation story, precisely the creation story in which an anthropomorphic God interacts as a human-like agent with Adam and Eve, his interpretation of this passage is clearly not literal. It closely follows the model of incorporating "myths" – that is, myths-as-stories – into philosophical dialogues so expertly championed by Plato, the Neoplatonists, and, incidentally, also by Marx.

---

[259] Holz, "Idee," 463.
[260] Gen. 3
[261] Josh. 10:13

If the role of the Platonic forms is to illuminate the essence of phenomena, if the forms themselves are illuminated by the good, if, as Benjamin argues, the good is truth is God, that is, if God is that "epistemically original" but inscrutable something, then the metaphysical, religious, and theological in Benjamin's philosophy is simply a gesture to the epistemologically highest signifier, the metasemantic regulative function.[262] Perhaps here we could re-phrase Anselm of Canterbury's famous maxim to the effect that, for Benjamin, "God is that without which nothing can be thought." This definition transcends the secular philosophical-political demarcations of the religious and the theological as distinct from other instantiations of the social. This definition of truth-as-God also suggests that even when Benjamin does not explicitly use religious language in his writings, the underlying assumptions structuring his arguments remain "religious."

As was argued in Chapter One, the "God-concept" is a black hole of meaning in that it remains mysterious while, simultaneously, exerting an enormous organizing influence on everything in its vicinity. The "God-concept" is that something which must be posited to exist, if meaning itself is to exist. It is that which defines everything in reference to itself, but which itself is groundless.

Benjamin's invocation of God can be read as his realism, which is simultaneously metaphysical. Contrary to Kant and the Neokantians, Benjamin maintains that experience contains a metaphysical core. Experience itself is metaphysical. The "reformulation of 'experience' as 'metaphysics' means that so-called experience is virtually included in metaphysical or dogmatic part of philosophy, into which the highest epistemological –

---

[262] Holz, "Idee," 463.

that is, the critical – is transformed" (*SW1*, 109; *GS2*, 169.)[263] In equating truth with God, Benjamin repeats the central claim of all realist philosophies, including all theologies. Although any given theology is not necessarily realistic, it nonetheless is a type of philosophical realism in that it posits the existence of an ultimate actual state of affairs, or, at the epistemic level, it supposes an ultimate ground of meaning. This claim, however, can never be redeemed by that philosophy or theology itself, since it presupposes that which it attempts to explain. Ultimately, all realist claims to a true state of the world are metaphysical, and all realist epistemologies imply a reference to a fundamental signifier. Even philosophical materialism is metaphysical in its ontological claim that reality is in essence material. Benjamin's realism, however, is relational. The truth is found not in the object alone, not simply in the idea that exists beyond the subject, but "in-between" the subject and object.

We have arrived at what I regard as Benjamin's sublime paradox. All realist philosophies must posit an epistemic ground in order to provide an anchor for the chain of signification. If, however, a philosophy is to avoid devolving into nihilism or skepticism, it must include the human position, the human subject as central, and, therefore, it cannot embrace the positivist insistence which maintains that this function is accomplished by the thesis that dead matter provides the ultimate ground of meaning. I argue that for Benjamin a humanist philosophy, one that centralizes the human subject must necessarily

---

[263] "[...] *die Umprägung der 'Erfahrung' zu 'Metaphysik' bedeutet daß im metaphysischen oder dogmatischen Teil der Philosophie, in den der oberste erkenntnis-theoretische, d. i. der kritische Teil übergeht, virtuell die sogenannte Erfharung eingeschlossen ist.*"

place a "God-concept" at the centre of its epistemology, since, as was argued in Chapter One, "God" is simply the symbolic representation of the social. Benjamin, therefore, simply states explicitly that which is denied, or perhaps even suppressed, in many modern philosophies: underlying his very "critical" or "realist" tenets, is the metaphysical appeal to reality, and a truth in reference to a good. In terms of the form of the argument, this line of thought brings Benjamin within the orbit of a certain orthodox Kantianism, which requires of its readers a Pascalian "leap of faith." The last link in the chain of signification cannot be justified, it must simply be assumed. By equating God with truth, Benjamin suggests that this is precisely the underlying assumption in realist philosophies as well. That is to say that Benjamin is not arguing for an ontological reality, but rather positing the existence of this very reality on epistemic grounds.

> Thus, the task of the coming philosophy can be conceived as the discovery or creation of that concept of knowledge which, by relating experience *exclusively* to the transcendental consciousness, makes not only mechanical but also religious experience logically possible. This should definitely be taken to mean not that knowledge makes God possible but that it *definitely does make the experience and doctrine of him possible in the first place* (*SW1,* 105; *GS2*, 168; emphasis added.)[264]

---

[264] "*So läßt sich also die Aufgabe der kommenden Philosophie fassen als die Auffindung oder Schaffung desjenigen Erkenntnisbegriffes der, indem er zugleich auch den Erfahrungsbegriff* ausschließlich *auf das transzendentale Bewußtsein bezieht, nicht allein mechanische sondern auch religiöse Erfahrung logisch ermöglicht. Damit soll durchaus nicht gesagt sein daß die Erkenntnis Gott, wohl aber durchaus daß sie die Erfahrung und Lehre von ihm allererst ermöglicht.*"

Chapter Three – Images of Revelation and the Rescue of Divine Names

Benjamin's insistence that truth "resists [...] being projected into the field of knowledge," (*Tragic Drama* 29-30; *GSI*, 209)[265] places the philosopher in an embarrassing predicament. As was argued in Chapter Two, Benjamin equates truth with the "God-concept." Since Benjamin maintains that truth-as-God references something which cannot be known, the philosopher seems forced to accept the sublime silence that Kierkegaard's Abraham suffered.[266] Faced with the divine command to execute his son Isaac, Abraham could not articulate in human words the meaning or purpose of God's monstrous demand.[267] In *Euthyphro* Plato succinctly formulates the problematic at the heart of Abraham's impossible situation. On his way to the Athenian courthouse, Socrates asks Euthyphro whether a pious act is pious because it is loved by the gods, or whether it is, instead, loved by the gods because it is pious. Is it right for Abraham to kill Isaac because it is God's command or is it God's command because, in some unfathomable sense, it is right? Kierkegaard's Abraham is forced to accept the radical consequences of a rigorous monotheism, in which the horns of the Euthyphro-dilemma collapse into one another. If,

---

[265] "*Die Wahrheit, vergegenwärtigt im Reigen der dargestellten Ideen, entgeht jeder wie immer gearteten Projektion in den Erkenntnisbereich.*"

[266] It is important here to follow Kierkegaard reading of the *Akedha* (the binding of Isaac) instead of referring directly to the biblical account. This need arises from the fact that the earliest Jews were most likely monolatrists, rather than strict monotheists. As will be seen presently, however, the emphasis on monotheism is of special significance.

[267] Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*.

as many Judeo-Christian exegetes of the Bible maintain, God is the condition for being, then the only thing that can be "said" about God is tautological, as Moses discovered when God identified himself as "I am that I am."[268]

Benjamin's reluctance to name the truth he strives to convey directly can be read in the context of the biblical commandment against making graven images, which in exegesis is a taboo on verbalizing the tetragrammaton, (YHWH);[269] a taboo, incidentally, that Engels introduces into Marxian theory in the French introduction to *Capital*, when he advises against a positive depiction of a communist utopia. Traditionally, however, the command against making graven images expressed the pious belief that any adjective, image, and even a proper name reduces the ultimate and incomprehensible grandeur of the divinity. Defining God, speaking "His" name (YHWH), making a "likeness" of "Him," is an act of determination and, therefore, of limitation. Any limit, as Hegel demonstrated, presupposes a beyond. However, to define God as the condition of being, necessarily negates the possibility of maintaining that there is something beyond, since the only "thing" that could be beyond being is no-thing. That this line of reasoning represents an authoritative biblical tradition is demonstrated by Augustine, who follows a traditional line of Neoplatonic thought when he suggests "nothing" as the solution to the problem of evil, a problem that, as Abraham's predicament suggests, is endemic in the

---

[268] Ex. 3:14

[269] Also see, Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973.) Jay makes a similar claim about the other members of the Frankfurt School suggesting that the Jewish background of Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse is betrayed by their unwillingness to depict a communist utopia, preferring instead to focus on a critique of the present.

very logic of monotheism. In the biblical monotheistic tradition, where God is both the ultimate condition for being, and where being is deemed good,[270] the question of the role of evil is significant: Evil both exists (God tells Abraham to kill his son) and at the same time cannot exist (because God and that which he creates is good.) Augustine concludes, therefore, that like a hole in a shirt, evil does not constitute a substance with qualities but is a lack, a negation of being itself. Interestingly, in the *Tragic Drama*, Benjamin follows Augustine's reasoning still further when he writes, "Knowledge of evil, therefore, has no object. There is no evil in the world" (*Tragic Drama*, 233; *GS1*, 407.)[271] To speak of God is to determine God, and implies that there is something more that is not in some manner dependent on God. Such a claim, however, is incompatible with the logic of a consistent monotheism. In the language of the Bible, to define truth is to make a graven image; it is the worship of the golden calf. Faced with this paradox, Benjamin's philosopher like Kierkegaard's Abraham seems destined to remain silent. Following this logic to its conclusion Tiedemann suggests that for Benjamin philosophy becomes a negative theology.[272]

However, while Benjamin maintains that truth cannot be articulated, it can, he suggests be represented. He writes that one of the basic tasks of philosophy is "the

---

[270] Gen. 1
[271] "*Also hat das Wissen von dem Bösen gar keinen Gegenstand.*"
[272] Rolf Tiedemann, *Studien zur Philosophie Walter Benjamins* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1973), 57.

representation of ideas" (*Tragic Drama*, 34; *GS1*, 214; emphasis added)[273] and, "If representation is to stake its claim as the real methodology of the philosophical treatise then it must be the *representation* of ideas" (*Tragic Drama*, 29; *GS1*, 209.)[274] Caygill comments, "For Benjamin transcendental truth beyond the grasp of knowledge and inconceivable without theology is thus the object not of proofs but of a 'representation' that is an apprehension and exposition of meaning as does the phenomenological tradition from Husserl to Heidegger and beyond [....]"[275] For Benjamin, the idea emerges relationally. We recall that his method of metaschematizing, of creating thought-images, was deployed so as to discern homologies. The idea of a work of art "bodies forth" in the tension between art-work and critic, the idea of a text between commentary, or translation and original, and the idea of a historical moment in the relationship between a now and a past which it cites. The truth content of philosophy in general then, while inexpressible in the sense that it cannot be named directly, nonetheless, arises in a constellation produced through commentary. The model for a philosophy with a relational structure of truth is one closer to that of translation, art criticism and, importantly, biblical commentary, than it is to the mathematico-mechanical philosophy of the Neokantians, the positivists, or the Anglo-American analytic philosophers who follow Bertrand Russell's lead (*Tragic Drama*, 27; *GS1*, 203).

---

[273] The full German sentence reads: "*Und eben diese Vermittlerrolle macht sie tauglich zu der anderen, gleich ursprünglichen Aufgabe der Philosophie, zur Darstellung der Ideen mit Mittel der Empirie.*"

[274] "*Wenn Darstellung als eigentliche Methode des philosophischen Traktates sich behaupten will, so muß sie Darstellung der Ideen sein.*"

[275] Caygill, *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience*, 38.

> The more clearly mathematics demonstrates that the total elimination of the problem of representation [...] is the sign of genuine knowledge, the more conclusively does it reveal its renunciation of that area of truth towards which language is directed. (*Tragic Drama*, 27; *GS1*, 203)[276]

Benjamin, therefore, deliberately bestows the theological concept of doctrine or teaching (*Lehre*) on a philosophy capable of *representing* truth.

In order to theorize Benjamin's philosophical method, his manner of representing the ideas, which he also maps onto the role of the art critic, political revolutionary, historian, and philosopher, it is necessary to relate his understanding of truth to his critical epistemological theory of rescue and to his philosophy of language. In essence, Benjamin's theory of language in relation to philosophy, revolutionary politics, art criticism and history, might be summarized as follows: commentary on an element of the social text produces a constellation – Benjamin will call it a dialectical-image (*dialektisches Bild)* or a thought-image (*Denkbild*) – which crystallizes the idea in a graphic form, the purpose of which is to gesture toward a truth structured relationally. "History does not decay into stories, but into pictures" [N11,4].[277] Benjamin's theory posits that a constellation as an image of the idea(s) has the power, by virtue of the faculty of remembrance, to shock a dreaming subject, or even a dreaming collective, out of the

---

[276] "*Wie deutlich es Mathematik belegt, daß die gänzliche Elimination des Darstellungsproblems, als welche jede streng sachgemäße Didaktik sich gibt, das Signum echter Erkenntnis ist, gleich bündig stellt sich ihr Verzicht auf den Bereich der Wahrheit, den die Sprachen meinen, dar.*"

[277] "*Geschichte zerfällt in Bildern, nicht in Geschichten.*"

slavish condition of mythic experience into the apprehension of the really real, or truth, itself a theological category indexed by the concept of the Messiah.

I – Rescue: Benjamin's Religious Method of Critique

The clue to the subterranean connection between Benjamin's religiously inspired theory of rescue, his philosophy of language, and, what I identify as his phenomenology of experience of Capital, is given in the infamous "Epistemico-Critical Prologue," to his *Tragic Drama*. This passage is the nexus that connects seemingly disparate strands of Benjamin's thought, and as such, will serve as a reference point for much of the following analysis. Benjamin writes:

> Truth is not an intent which realizes itself in empirical reality; it is the power which determines the essence of this empirical reality. The state of being, beyond all phenomenality, to which alone this power belongs, is that of the name. This determines the manner in which ideas are given. But they *are not so much given in a primordial language as in a primordial form of perception*, in which words possess their own nobility as names, *unimpaired by cognitive meaning*. (*Tragic Drama*, 36; *GS1*, 216; emphasis added)[278]

[278] "*Nicht als ein Meinen, welches durch die Empirie seine Bestimmung fände, sondern als die das Wesen dieser Empirie erst prägende Gewalt besteht die Wahrheit. Das aller Phänomenalität entrückte Sein, dem allein diese Gewalt eignet, ist das des Namens. Es bestimmt die Gegebenheit der Ideen. Gegeben aber sind sie nicht sowohl in einer Ursprache, denn in einem Urvernehmen, in welchem die Worte ihren benennenden Adel unverloren an die erkennende Bedeutung besitzen.*"

I suggest that the first and last sentence in this quotation gesture to Benjamin's theory of rescue.[279] Since the theory of rescue is an important method of Benjamin's philosophical investigations, and since it also informs his theory of language and his phenomenology of experience, it will be useful to begin this analysis by tracing the broad outlines of the genealogy of this epistemic device.

Kaulen notes that there are at least three distinct uses of the theory of rescue in Benjamin's work: (i) as an "epistemological" method deployed in opposition to the method of inquiry in scientistic philosophies, (ii) as an eschatological-historical concept, and (iii) as a category in his literary criticism.[280] The present inquiry will be concerned primarily with the first articulation, and, to some extent, the second; as a gnoseological device that is employed in opposition to positivist theory. The argument being developed is that the classical Greek (pagan) notion of rescue, which Benjamin translates into a biblical idiom, is the philosophical foundation for his theory of language and his method for reading the social. I agree with Kaulen when he suggests that the theory of rescue underlies many of Benjamin's key texts notably, *Tragic Drama*, the "Elective Affinities" essay, *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, the *Arcades Project* and even the "Theses on the Philosophy of History."[281] Kaulen further suggests that Benjamin's Baudelaire study of

---

[279] Cf. Origen, "On First Principles," 204. The above passage from Benjamin's *Tragic Drama* seems to echo ideas already presented in Origen, when he writes, "[...] an implication of the main argument sufficies to show that there are some things the meaning of which cannot in any way rightly be explained by words of a human language [...] but are made plain by a purer intellectual apprehension rather than by any properties words have."

[280] Kaulen, "Rettung," 629.

[281] Ibid., 619.

the 1930s was an attempt at a "materialist" rescue of lyric poetry in the age of Capital.[282] The notion of rescue demonstrates how profoundly "religious" Benjamin's philosophy actually is. Benjamin's theory of the subject, his theory of the social, his method of analysis and his manner of presentation are all predicated on a religiously inspired philosophy. One might even be tempted to apply Zizek's notion of a "materialist theology" to Benjamin's oeuvre.[283]

Although the centrality of the theory of rescue in his philosophy was first recognized by Habermas, my exposition of the history of this notion is influenced primarily by the German philosopher of science, Jürgen Mittelstrass, specifically, his 1962 dissertation, *Rettung Der Phänomene* (*Rescue of Phenomena.*) According to Mittlestrass, it was the 6th century Neoplatonist Simplicius, who, in his commentary on Aristotle's *Heaven and Earth*, claimed that Plato had given his students the task of finding the regulating principle that could account for the erratic movements of the planets.[284] The historical accuracy of Simplicius' account is highly suspect, and the actual origin of the concept remains contested.[285] The confusion about the origins of the notion is somewhat aggravated by the fact that the interest in the theory of rescue in the modern period was first registered by the Marburg Neokantians, who, as Mittlestrass complains, too eagerly accept Simplicius' rather uncritical account of the genealogy of the concept. Natorp, for example, assumes that rescue is already operative in the Platonic

---

[282] Ibid.
[283] See, Slavoj Zizek, "Towards a Materialist Theology," *Angelaki* 12, no. 1 (2007).
[284] Mittelstrass, *Die Rettung der Phänomene*, 1, 150.
[285] Ibid., 150.

dialogues. However, as Mittlestrass convincingly demonstrates, while there is some evidence supporting Simplicius' and Natorp's accounts that Plato was at the origin of this theory, there is more evidence suggesting he was not. Regardless of who may actually have originated the theory, however, the general concern of the Platonists, states Simplicius, was the fact that according to Plato's philosophy, only the ideas, which are by definition perfect, express actual ontological being. The problem they faced was that the motion of the planets, observed within a geocentric astronomical paradigm, did not submit to any discernable pattern. The etymology of our English "planet," from the Greek *planetai*, "wandering star," echoes the ancient observation that some of the heavenly bodies roamed the sky without submitting to any discernable order.

According to classical Greek cosmology, that of Plato's friend Eudoxus, for example, the planets occupy a realm of perfection, and should express this perfection through perfectly regular, that is, circular orbits. Plato struggles with the discrepancy between observed fact and theoretical expectations in the *Timaeus*, where he is forced to advance the unsatisfying hypothesis that even though the planets' motions are inscrutable, they must, nonetheless, be regulated by some higher order not discernable by mortals. The fact, therefore, that the planets did not seem to have perfect circular orbits, that their orbits could even be retrograde, presented a problem worth solving. Thus, according to Mittelstrass, saving astronomical phenomena, as interpreted by the Marburg Neokantians, was a proto-scientific task, if not already in the classical antiquity of Plato's day, then certainly in late antiquity. The object of rescue was to find the mathematical model, consisting exclusively of circles, with regular non-deviating motion, that could accurately

describe and predict the motion of the planets.[286] Rescuing phenomena meant trying to determine the underlying essence, the pure idea, that is to save the divine status of the supra-lunar bodies by reasoning that they submit to regular laws, despite the appearance of erratic, imperfect motion. This principle soon migrated from its birthplace in Greek astronomy to classical Greek epistemology.[287] The purpose of the theory in epistemology – as the Neokantians also make use of it – is to apply rules to phenomena in order that their truth, their reality, that is their essences can be "seen." This "seeing" is itself the rescue of phenomena, which are saved from the oblivion of non-recognition. "Seeing" is, of course, accomplished by the Platonic "mind's eye," the eye of wisdom, the eye of philosophy which "sees," i.e., it comprehends, or recognizes, an essence in the manifold.[288]

For Cohen and Natorp, Plato is an early incarnation of the spirit of modern science.[289] With their assumption that Plato relied upon the theory of rescue, which attempts to discern the underlying essence in the appearances, they believed to have discovered the first tentative intellectual steps that would eventually lead to the modern western scientific worldview. The purpose of our inquiry is to trace the outlines of the genealogy of the notion of rescue, not to critique the Marbug Neokantians. It is, nonetheless, worth mentioning that, as Mittelstrass argues, it is dubious to attribute anything like a modern conception of science to Plato or his students. Despite the fact

---

[286] Ibid., 1.
[287] Ibid., 146 – 147.
[288] Cf. Cohen, *Logik der Reinen Erkenntnis*, 5: "*Idee ist der Wurzel nach auch mit dem Sehen verwant.*" My translation: "The idea is the root, which is also related to seeing."
[289] See, for example, Cohen, *Logik der Reinen Erkenntnis*, 19-20.

that Greek philosophy shares with modern science the conspicuous feature that its methods and conclusions are subject to "peer review" as it were, there are far too many differences between Plato's philosophy and the scientific method to suppose that Plato stood at its origin.[290]

It is in the above sense of rescue, by applying interpretive rules and principles that, notes Mittlestrass, the Marburg Neokantians adopted the theory to help solve the two-world problem in Kant's philosophy, not, however, without important revisions, both to the classical conception of the theory of rescue, and to Kantianism itself. Mittlestrass contends that perhaps the Marburg school's most distinctive feature is in having merged Plato's realm of the forms, the Platonic ideas, with the Kantian ideas. This merger is the basis for their re-interpretation of rescue, the general outlines of which Benjamin also adopts. In this reading, the Kantian ideas take on a radically changed character, in that their role is to replace the epistemic function of Kant's noumenal realm, not, however, the ontological fact of a noumenal realm.[291] The realm of the ideas for the Neokantians is the site where most of the epistemic work that comprises experience is accomplished. Whereas for Kant, it was the noumenal realm that was partly responsible for what could be experienced, the Neokantians are much more "idealist" in the sense that, while they do not deny the existence of an ontic realm beyond the subject, they regard the ideas as the primary faculty for generating experience and knowledge.[292] The Neokantians' point of departure, explains Mittlestrass is Kant's own explication of Plato in the first *Critique*:

---

[290] Mittelstrass, *Die Rettung der Phänomene*.
[291] Ibid., 16.
[292] Ibid.

> Plato made use of the expression Idea in such a way that we can readily see that he understood by it something that not only could never be borrowed from the senses, but that even goes far beyond the concepts of the understanding (with which Aristotle occupied himself), since nothing encountered in experience could ever be congruent to it. Ideas for him are archetypes of things themselves, and not, like the categories, merely the key to possible experiences. In his opinion they flowed from the highest reason, through which human reason partakes in them; our reason, however, now no longer finds itself in its original state, but must call back with toil the old, now very obscure ideas through a recollection (which is called philosophy.)[293]

Mittlestrass suggests that in this passage in particular, the Neokantians found a new definition of the Kantian ideas, namely as experimental hypotheses necessary to understand phenomena.[294] In linking the Kantian idea with the Platonic idea and, in turn, relating both to the notion of an hypothesis capable, not only of explaining, but also of actually making phenomena "visible," the members of the Marburg school are making use of the theory of rescue. In this they actually seem to be following the philosophical spirit, if not the letter of Kant, since as Kant himself had suggested, it was the method of the scientists, their manner of investigation, that allowed for such remarkable progress in their respective fields. In Galileo and Newton, both incidentally, Christian Neoplatonists, Kant discovered the need to approach nature with a preconceived notion as to how the

---

[293] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 370.
[294] Mittlestrass, *Die Rettung der Phänomene*, 22.

world was organized. The philosopher was not to be a student of nature, but her judge, not one simply schooled by the teacher, but someone who questions, probes and tries to build a case. I cite a rather long passage from the *Critique of Pure Reason* as evidence that the Marburg school's reading has textual precedence in Kant. Kant writes,

> When Galileo rolled balls of a weight chosen by himself down an inclined plane, or when Torricelli made the air bear a weight that he had previously thought to be equal to that of a known column of water, or when in a later time Stahl changed metals into calx and then changed the latter back into metal by first removing something and then putting it back again, a light dawned on all those who study nature. They comprehended that *reason has insight only into what it itself produces according to its own design*; *that it must take the lead with principles for its judgments according to constant laws and compel nature to answer its questions, rather than letting nature guide its movements by keeping reason, as it were, in leading-strings*; for otherwise accidental observations, made according to no previously designed plan, can never connect up into a necessary law, which is yet what reason seeks and requires. Reason, in order to be taught by nature, must approach nature with its principles in one hand, according to which alone the agreement among appearances can count as laws, and, on the other hand, the experiments thought out in accordance with these principles – yet in order to be instructed by nature not like a pupil, who has recited to him whatever the teacher wants to say, but like an appointed judge who compels witnesses to answer the questions he puts to them. Thus even physics owes the advantageous revolution in

> its way of thinking to the inspiration that what reason would not be able to know of itself and has to learn from nature, it has to seek in the latter (though not merely ascribe to it) in accordance with what reason itself puts into nature. This is how natural science was first brought to the secure course of a science after groping about for so many centuries.[295]

In this sense, questions in the form of experiments are posed with a view to demonstrating whether the hypothesis is in fact descriptive of reality. This insight, according to the Neokantians, legitimates the equation of the idea with the scientific hypothesis, a regulative principle capable of illuminating, that is, rescuing, the true essence of phenomena from the flux of the manifold.[296]

This is in fact how scientific laws, first posited as hypotheses actually function. Scientific laws are themselves not given in nature, but are preconceived rules that structure appearances. Although Newton could "observe" the law of gravity, it was not "visible" in nature in its pure unadulterated essence and could only been "seen" in the appearances of the phenomenal manifold because of his hypothesis that there exists a force, related to mass acting on bodies at an inverse proportion to their distance, which

---

[295] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B xiii – B xiv.

[296] See for example, Cohen, *Logik der Reinen Erkenntnis*, 7: "*Das tiefste und das fruchtbarste methodische Mittel, mit dem die Astronomen des neuen Welbildes arbeiten, ist die Hypothese. [...] es bleibt doch bei dem genialen Verständnis, welches Kepler von der Platonischen Idee, als Hypothesis, besessen hat. Sie ist die Grundlage, vielmehr die Grundlegung, welche der Instruktion einer jeden exakten untersuchung voraufgehen muß.*" My translation, "The hypothesis is the deepest and most fruitful method [*methodische Mittel*] with which the astronomers generated a new image of the world [*Welbild.*] [...] it retains Kepler's ingenious forumlation that the Platonic idea as hypothesis possessed. It is the foundation, or better the founding which the instruction of every exact analysis must presuppose."

preceded and simultaneously explained his observations. Stars, says Cohen, are not in reality, they exist only in astronomy.[297] However, by equating the Kantian idea with a scientifically inspired hypothesis, i.e., an interpretive or regulating principle the Neokantians suggested that this and not the noumenal *Ding-an-sich* is the true source of knowledge.[298] Cohen notes that thinking establishes the basis of being.[299] In essence, Cohen and Natorp argue that the solution to Kant's "*methexis problem*" is that the supposition of an unknowable world beyond the senses should be replaced by the ideal realm of Platonic forms, forms as ideas, that is forms as epistemic presuppositions necessary for making phenomena recognizable, since, according to their reading, all knowledge has it origins in the ideas and not in the noumenal unknown.

Benjamin's theory of the constellation can therefore be recognized as another name for his theory of rescue. In the constellation, the referent (the idea), which is itself not fully determined by the empirical, seems to call forth (rescue) a certain set of stars (concept) from the night sky (the manifold.) By attributing narrative context the constellations become recognizable as constellations, and the night sky becomes an organized set of meanings. That is by "seeing" a Bull hunted by Orion, or "seeing" the herdsman Boötes follow the Great Bear constellations become meaningful "mythologically," that is to say socio-culturally, and in addition, the organized empirical manifold can provide information useful for farming and navigation. The idea is not

---

[297] I am indebted to Robert Gibbs for this insight. See, Robert Gibbs, "The Limits of Thought: Rosenzweig, Schelling, and Cohen," *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung* 43, no. 4 (Oct. – Dec. 1989): 633.
[298] Cohen, *Logik der Reinen Erkenntnis*, 16.
[299] Ibid., 20 (18): "[…] *das Denken erschafft die Grundlagen des Seins*."

simply an excess that comes after the empirical has been worked up into the concept, but itself determines the very essence of that phenomenon. The idea is the essence "in" the empirical, the phenomenon itself.[300] Benjamin summarizes this point with respect to both art and science, when he writes that

> [...] in the domain of art do the *ur*-phenomena – as ideals – present themselves adequately to perception, whereas in science they are replaced by the idea, *which is capable of illuminating the object of perception but never of transforming it in intuition.* The *ur*-phenomena do not exist before art; they subsist within it. (*SW1*, 148; *GS1*, 315; emphasis added)[301]

To be clear, however, the Marburg school is not positing some type of hyper-subjective relativism in which any theory whatsoever, independent of the empirical world, generates from itself what is then experienced.[302] Although, to a degree they lobby for a return to a certain idealism, they remain orthodox Kantians in that the ideas must be related to the given, even if the essence of what is given is not otherwise

---

[300] Bröcker, *Die Grundlosigkeit der Wahrheit*, 226.

[301] "[...] *im Bereich der Kunst allein die Urphänomene – als Ideale – sich der Anschauung darstellen, während in der Wissenschaft die Idee sie vertritt, die den Gegenstand der Wahrnehmung zu bestrahlen, doch in der Anschauung nie zu wandeln vermag. Die Urphänomene liegen der Kunst nicht vor, sie stehen in ihr.*"

[302] Cf. Gibbs, "The Limits if Thought: Rosenzweig, Schelling, and Cohen,": 633. Gibbs notes that Cohen's problem amounts to discovering how one can derive a perceptual "something" from "nothing" since, "Cohen argues that there is no given manifold or influx of sensible intuition." Gibbs suggests that Cohen's answer is the "infentensimal" method, a philosophical re-approriation of Leibniz's calculus, which incidentally also fascinated Benjamin in his youth. The scope of Gibb's argument is beyond the present analysis. However, I do not read Gibb's description of Cohen's theory as indicating a total subjective relativism, since even though the infentisimal "something" approaches zero, this does not result in allowing the subject to create any "something" out of the empirical "nothing."

recognizable. Newton, for example, did not imagine gravity without an empirical referent, but required the empirical to buttress his theory. And as Kant himself noted above, "what reason would not be able to know of itself [it] has to learn from nature, it has to seek in the latter (*though not merely ascribe to it)*" (emphasis added .)[303] Phenomena and ideas are *co*-determining forces. The ideas are empty unless they reference phenomena, but at the same time, the phenomena do not inextricably determine the ideas. While ideas and phenomena co-determine each other, the Neokantians are idealists in the sense that they give more epistemic authority to the ideas over phenomena. The Neokantians argue that the idea, while it must keep fidelity with the empirical, nonetheless does most of the epistemic work. Phenomena without recourse to the ideas do not have enough epistemic "substance" to be meaningful. If Kant had argued that concepts without intuitions are empty, perhaps the Neokantians could append a further maxim to the effect that intuitions and concepts without ideas remain confused. "Through their mediating role," notes Benjamin:

> concepts enable phenomena to participate in the existence of ideas. It is this same mediating role which fits them for the other equally basic task of philosophy, the representation of ideas. As the salvation of phenomena by means of ideas takes place, so too does the representation of ideas through the medium of empirical reality. For ideas are not represented in themselves, but solely and exclusively in an arrangement of concrete elements in the concept: as the configuration of these

---

[303] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B xiv.

elements. (*Tragic Drama*, 34; *GS1*, 214)[304]

Wiesenthal perceptively notes, that structurally speaking, the Marburg school's association of the idea with the scientific experiment is the basis for Benjamin's incorporation of the methodological concept of the extreme. The extreme, as Wiesenthal explains, is the form experience takes in the Neokantians' scientific hypothesis transposed into a humanities or social scientific discourse, a methodological device which illuminates most clearly the truth in phenomena.[305] Indeed, for Wiesenthal, Benjamin's extreme also shares conceptual affinities with Cassirer's "border-image" *(Grenzgebilde),* and Schmitt's "border-situation" *(Grenzfall)*, in that all three assume that the normal or the average does not unlock the truth of phenomena.[306] Wiesenthal's reference to Schmitt's *Political-Theology* is helpful for elucidating what Benjamin has in mind. Schmitt explains:

> The exception is more interesting than the rule. The rule proves nothing; the exception proves everything: It confirms not only the rule but also its existence, which derives only from the exception. In the exception the power of real life breaks through the crust of a mechanism that has become torpid by repetition.[307]

---

[304] "*Durch ihre Vermittlerrolle leihen die Begriffe den Phänomenen Anteil am Sein der Idee. Und eben diese Vermittlerrolle mach sie tauglich zu der anderen, gleich ursprünglichen Aufgabe der Philosophie, zur Darstellung der Ideen. Indem die Rettung der Phänomene vermittels der Ideen sich vollzieht, vollzeiht sich die Darstellung der Ideen mit Mittel der Empirie. Denn nicht an sich selbst, sondern einzig und allein in einer Zuordnung dinglicher Elemente im Begriff stellen die Ideen sich dar.*"

[305] Wiesenthal, *Zur Wissenschaftstheorie Walter Benjamins*, 12 – 13.

[306] Ibid., 17, 149.

[307] Carl Schmitt, *Political-Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 15.

Schmitt's explanation also bears on the role of the experiment. The experiment functions by creating a highly artificial environment, an "exception" as it were, where extraneous causes are minimized to permit the real causal factors to shine forth more brightly. That is, the experiment is an extreme situation, the theoretical vacuum which is a presupposition in many physics calculations for example, and which would rarely, if ever, occur in nature. It is created precisely so that nature herself is revealed. As if citing Schmitt, Benjamin notes that, "those elements which it is the function of the concept to elicit from phenomena are most clearly evident at the extremes" (*Tragic Drama,* 35; *GS1*, 215.)[308] "The empirical [...] can be all the more profoundly understood the more clearly it is seen as an extreme" (*Tragic Drama,* 35; *GS1*, 215.)[309] It is in this sense that Benjamin understands the work of art as an experiment, an experiment as the extreme case meant to illuminate, that is rescue an aspect of truth.[310]

Another relation between the extreme and the idea is noted by Bröker, who suggests that Benjamin regards works of art (and in a related context, philosophical systems) as pictorial representations of the ideas.[311] Bröker's comments are helpful in illuminating the utopic dimension of Benjamin's aesthetic theory. In as much as Benjamin believes the recognition of truth can actually be provoked, it is in the encounter with true works of art. Bröker's and Wiesenthal's insights also help shed light on the

---

[308] The full German sentence reads: "*Und zwar liegen jene Elemente, deren Auflösung aus den Phänomenen Aufgabe des Begriffes ist, in den Extremen am genauesten zutage.*"
[309] "*Das Empirische dagegen wird um so tiefer durchdrungen, je genauer es als ein Extremes eingesehen werden kann.*"
[310] Wiesenthal, *Zur Wissenschaftstheorie Walter Benjamins*, 13.
[311] Bröcker, *Die Grundlosigkeit der Wahrheit*, 213.

seemingly curious and disparate themes that occupied Benjamin throughout his life: Baroque drama, the gambler, the collector, museums, trash, children's toys. These are threshold phenomena, which, because of their marginal character, their dwelling on the extreme, on the periphery of the social reveal an essence, a truth about the social that would otherwise remain hidden.

Wiesenthal completes the circle of inquiry with respect to the methodological importance of rescue when she also notes that Benjamin's notion of the extreme could be seen as essentially synonymous with Cohen's notion of origin.[312] Cohen, as she explains, always insisted that origin has nothing to do with genesis. While genesis is a temporal category, origin is a logical one.[313] It may not be surprising on this point, to note that Cohen's notion is actually inherited from the Neoplatonists. As Remes explains, origin for the Neoplatonists:

> [...] happens by the necessity of the nature of the supreme cause and every cause following after it. The terminology of 'before,' 'after,' and 'sequence' is metaphorical; it is used to describe the metaphysical order of priority and posteriority, and hence *not* a production that would happen in temporal sequence."[314]

Similarly, Benjamin notes:

> Origin [*Ursprung*] although an entirely historical category, has, nevertheless, nothing to do with genesis [*Entstehung*]. The term origin is not intended to describe

---

[312] Wiesenthal, *Zur Wissenschaftstheorie Walter Benjamins*, 22.
[313] Ibid., 25.
[314] Pauliina Remes, *Neoplatonism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 46.

> the process by which the existent came into being, but rather to describe that which emerges from the process of becoming and disappearance. (*Tragic Drama*, 45; *GS1*, 226)[315]

Wiesenthal suggests that here Benjamin transposes origin from the domain of logic to that of history.[316] Her suggestion seems supported by Benjamin when he writes, "The category of origin is not therefore, as Cohen holds, a purely logical one, but a historical one" (*Tragic Drama*, 46; *GS1*, 226.)[317] However, I suggest, that Benjamin does not intend to dismiss the logical side, when this concept is viewed in the context of his method. In his work, the notion of origin retains the logical status bequeathed by Cohen and the Neoplatonists, which is not, however, to deny its historical dimension. A brief analogy with Kant's idealism may be instructive here. In Kant's work, the transcendental subject is a-historical. However, Benjamin, like Adorno would suggest that the subject must be seen as being historically constructed.[318] This point is clearly articulated by Horkheimer when he notes that, "[...] materialism, unlike idealism, always understands thinking to be the thinking of particular men within a particular period of time. It challenges every claim to the autonomy of thought."[319] Granting the historicity of the

---

[315] "*Ursprung, wiewohl durchaus historische Kategorie, hat mit Entstehung dennoch nichts gemein. Im Ursprung wird kein Werden des Entsprungenen, vielmehr dem Werden und Vergehen Entspringendes gemeint.*"
[316] Wiesenthal, *Zur Wissenschaftstheorie Walter Benjamins*, 25.
[317] "*Die Kategorie des Ursprungs ist also nicht, wie Cohen meint, eine reine logische, sondern historisch.*"
[318] Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, "Subject and Object," 500.
[319] Horkheimer, "Materialism and Metaphysics," in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell and others (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 2002), 34.

subject, does not, necessarily invalidate the notion of a transcendental subject, which remains transcendent for individual subjectivity. Similarly, the notion of origin can contain *both* a logical and historical moment, with the logical dimension being more relevant in terms of theorizing Benjamin's method in the abstract.

The origin discovered in the experiment is the moment of recognition. This is not something that occurs before the experiment, but is that principle in the experiment which makes the essence of the phenomenal visible. Essence shines forth as origin within, not prior, to phenomena. As Benjamin again notes:

> Origin is an eddy in the stream of becoming, and in its current it swallows the material involved in the process of genesis. That which is original is never revealed in the naked and manifest existence of the factual; its rhythm is apparent only to a dual insight. On the one hand it needs to be recognized as a process of restoration and reestablishment, but, on the other, and precisely because of this, as something imperfect and incomplete. (*Tragic Drama*, 45; *GS1*, 226)[320]

Interestingly, Benjamin's reliance on the theory of rescue is structurally similar to the method Marx employs in *Capital*. I take this relationship to indicate that Benjamin is in some senses more of a Marxian theorist than some of his readers have been willing to

---

[320] "*Der Ursprung steht im Fluß des Werdens als Strudel und reißt in seine Rhythmik das Entstehungsmaterial hinein. Im nackten offenkundigen Bestand des Faktischen gibt das Ursprüngliche sich niemals zu erkennen und einzig einer Doppeleinsicht steht seine Rythmik offen. Sie will als Restauration, als Wiederherstellung einerseits, als eben darin Unvollendetes, Unabgeschlossenes andererseits erkannt sein.*"

admit.[321] In the second half of the twentieth century, a group of Japanese political economists, foremost among them Kozo Uno and Thomas T. Seikin, founding members of what would later be called the "Uno School," noted that Marx theorized the concept "Capital" at three different "levels of abstraction": The "highest level" is Capital in its "pure" or abstracted form. The "middle level" is Capital as partly determined by counter-tendencies. The "lowest level," is Capital as it actually exists in the concrete historical. The pure instantiation of Capital is how a theorist might imagine Capital, if the phenomenon could incarnate itself without having to conform to nor integrate any actual historical resistance. The pure level of Capital is Capital as Capital and nothing more. This pure form of Capital is what Marx develops in the commodity fetishism chapter of Volume One.

At the other end of the spectrum of abstraction is the concept of Capital in its concrete instantiation. Here Capital confronts counter-tendencies, which may be alien to the logic of the concept, and which can prevent Capital from expressing its inner logic. When in Chapter Ten of the first volume, the "Working Day," Marx discusses the moral outrage over the mortality-rate of child labourers, he is theorizing the concept of Capital in a more concrete instantiation. Whereas there is no necessary internal contradiction in the concept of employing child labour, resistance from certain cultural and historical forces is registered by real workers, owners, and other actually existing members of society. The Uno-school adds a middle level between the pure form and the concrete

---

[321] See for example, T. J. Clark, "Should Benjamin have Read Marx?" *boundary 2* 30, no. 1 (2003): 31-49.

form of Capital, in which a certain amount of counter-tendencies and a certain amount of Capital-as-Capital comingle.

The pure form of Capital never actually exists in the concrete historical. However, the Uno-school maintains that a pure form needs to be established as a "useful fiction"; to allow Capital to be glimpsed in the concrete-historical. The strategy is to theorize how Capital would exist without any actual historical counter-tendencies in order to "see" the force of Capital when "contaminated" by elements of the social that can be deemed extraneous to the concept. The supposition that an abstract notion of Capital needs to be developed and posited so that the chaos of the manifold can be interpreted, structurally resembles the theory of rescue.

Merleau-Ponty notes that at least on this question, Weber sees affinities between his own method of constructing "ideal types," and what the Uno-school later theorized as Marx's method in his economic works. Merleau-Ponty quotes Weber, who writes that Marxism is, "the most important instance of the construction of ideal types [....]"[322] While on the question of reading Benjamin on religion, I have been lobbying for a paradigmatic shift away from Weber and towards Durkheim, methodologically, there are noteworthy structural affinities among Weber's construction of ideal types, Marx's method of abstract concept creation, and Benjamin's theory of the rescue of phenomena. All three posit that an essence in the manifold must be hypothesized in order to be "seen." Whereas for Marx and Weber, this method remains confined to the scope of social scientific inquiry, Benjamin suggests rescue as an epistemic model for the encounter with

---

[322] Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures of the Dialectic*, 25.

the manifold as such. To discern the logic of Benjamin's suggestion that the theory of rescue is also descriptive of a phenomenological encounter, we must turn to his philosophy of language.

II – A Return to Eden: From Rescue to Language, From Plato to Adam

Although many readers agree with Rochlitz who maintains that "Any effort to understand" Benjamin's "thought must begin with" "On Language as Such,"[323] I follow Cayghill, who argues that this essay is best understood as a transitional work. Unlike Cayghill, however, who suggests that the centrality of language in Benjamin's thought is a misreading that should be replaced by the notion of colour, I, like Rochlitz, Scholem and many others, adhere to the thesis that language comprises a fundamental dimension of his philosophy. However, I do not believe that "On Language" represents the mature form of his theory. The essay does contain valuable insights, and suggestively points towards themes developed later in his oeuvre. "On Language," as I will use it, is helpful to determine more fully how the concepts of name, idea, God, truth, theology and revelation relate to each other and to the notion of rescue as theorized in the *Tragic Drama*, for example. However, I do not believe that the details of the arguments presented in "On Language" can be brought into accord with Benjamin's later theory, and where there is a conflict, I tend to side with the arguments found in his later texts. One example of Benjamin's still inchoate state of thought can be seen with respect to his theory of allegory, which is developed in opposition to 18th and 19th century aesthetic

[323] Rochlitz, *The Disenchantment of Art*, 14.

theories of the symbol, is not yet fully articulated in "On Language," and as such, there is a certain looseness in his vocabulary that conflicts with later formulations. The language essay was written when Benjamin was only twenty-four years old, and it manifests all the oedipal hubris of a young scholar challenging the philosophical fathers of his tradition. Its bold pronouncements, like those in "On the Coming Philosophy," are forceful and blunt, but often simultaneously cryptic. I am tempted to agree with Derrida who complained that Benjamin's language essay is "overly enigmatic."[324]

Benjamin begins "On Language" by suggesting that what linguistic theory defines as language is actually only a subset of actual language. "Every expression of human mental life," writes Benjamin:

> can be understood as a kind of language, and this understanding, in the manner of a true method, everywhere raises new questions. It is possible to talk about a language of music and of sculpture, about a language of justice that has nothing directly to do with those in which German or English legal judgments are couched, about a language of technology that is not the specialized language of technicians. Language in such contexts means the tendency inherent in the subjects concerned – technology, art, justice, or religion – toward the communication of the contents of mind. To sum up: all communication of the contents of the mind is language,

---

[324] Jacques Derrida, *Psyche: Inventions of the Other* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 200.

> communication in words being only a particular case of human language and of justice, poetry, or whatever underlying or founded on it. (*SW1*, 62; *GS2*, 140)[325]

It is necessary briefly to dwell on a problem with the English translation that will prove to have consequences for the remaining discussion. The English translators of Benjamin's *Selected Writings* have chosen to render the German "*Geistiges Wesen*" as "mental being." This choice echoes Edmund Jephcott's formulations in *Reflections*, in which he variously translates *Geistiges Wesen* as "mental meaning," "mental entity," or "mental being."[326] The multiplicity of meanings of the German concept *Geist* is notoriously difficult express in English. No single English concept comes close to covering the same conceptual territory as does the German *Geist*. The translators are certainly correct that in some contexts "mental" is an adequate choice. Precedence for this choice can be found, for example, in the first English translations of Hegel's *Phenomenology* (*of Mind.*) However, the term "mental" places too great an emphasis on the cognitive or the psychological, while suppressing the German concept's other meanings. *Geist* can also refer to "spirit," "specter," "ghost," "consciousness," "psyche,"

---

[325] "*Jede Äußerung menschlichen Geisteslebens kann als eine Art der Sprache aufgefaßt werden, und diese Auffassung erschließt nach Art einer wahrhaften Methode überall neue Fragestellungen. Man kann von einer Sprache der Musik und der Plastik reden, von einer Sprache der Justiz, die nichts mit denjenigen, in denen deutsche order englische Rechtssprüche abgefaßt sind, unmittelbar zu tun hat, von einer Sprache der Technik, die nicht die Fachsprache der Techniker ist. Sprache bedeutet in solchem Zusammenhang das auf Mitteilung geistiger Inhalte gerichtete Prinzip in den betreffenden Gegenständen: in Technik, Kunst, Justiz oder Religion. Mit einem Wort: jede Mitteilung geistiger Inhalte ist Sprache, wobei die Mitteilung durch das Wort nur ein besonderer Fall, der der menschlichen und der ihr zugrunde liegenden oder auf ihr fundierten (Justiz, Poesie), ist.*"

[326] See for example, Walter Benjamin, *Reflections*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York, New York: Schocken Books, 1978), 314.

"*nous*," and "intellect," to name the most common. Later translators of Hegel's *Phenomenology* chose "Spirit" in order to cope with the ambiguity of the German concept. The connection to Hegel's *Phenomenology* is not only philological, since following Adorno, Cayghill, and others, I maintain that there exists a certain phenomenological moment in Benjamin's philosophy, especially apparent in his philosophy of language, which is somewhat masked by the English translation. This phenomenological moment in his philosophy of language addresses a similar concern, regarding the incommunicability of the given, that Hegel discusses in his *Phenomenology*. However, this phenomenological moment is less visible in the English translations, where the need to reduce the ambiguity of *Geist* also reduces the interpretive breadth that the German concept allows. For example, translating "[...] *das geistige Wesen der Lampe* [...]" (*GS2*, 142) as "[...] the mental entity of the Lamp [...]" (*SW1*, 63) suggests an overly psychological reading that is not in the German implied with the same intensity. The German permits a phenomenological reading in which the lamp appears to being in the manner in which "language" is "spirit" appearing to "spirit," to loosely paraphrase Hegel. In order to maintain the openness and multivalent reference of the German concept, I have chosen to leave *Geist un*-translated in the following sections.

As already indicated, Benjamin suggests that language is more than the articulation of signs referring to signifiers.[327] Such an interpretation would limit the

---

[327] See Bröcker, "Sprache," 743: "*Eine Sprache, die dem handlungstheoretischen Konzept Benjamins entsprechend unmittelbare Wirkung entfalten könnte, entzieht sich zwangsläufig der elementaren Subjekt-Prädikat-Relation. Dies bedeutet zunächst, daß Benjamin die Auffassung von Sprache als Zeichensystem zurückweisen muß.*" My

faculty of language to human beings. Structurally, Benjamin's critique echoes his critique of the Kantian two-world theory. For him, reality is not composed of atomistic objects that are then given referents by human beings in the sense of attributing ideal designators to objects in the world.[328] Instead, for Benjamin everything has a language. A lamp has a lamp language, a flower a flower language. It might even be more accurate to say that everything *is* language. All communication of the contents of *Geist*, Benjamin claims, is language. Reading this passage in conjunction with the *Tragic Drama* quote cited earlier, helps to elucidate Benjamin's expanded category of language. If "names determine the manner in which ideas are given," (*Tragic Drama*, 36; *SW1*, 216)[329] and if "The name in the realm of language, has as its sole purpose and its incomparably high meaning that it is the innermost nature of language itself," (*SW1*, 65; *GS2*, 144)[330] if, indeed, "The name is that through which, and in which language communicates itself absolutely," (*SW1*, 65; *GS2*, 144)[331] and further, if ideas-as-names are not given in an *Ur*-language, but in a "primordial form" of perception, a perception in which ideas-as-names are "unimpaired by cognitive meaning," then, what Benjamin terms language, is really closer to what might be called, *mutatis mutandis*, a phenomenology of encounter. His

---

translation: "In order to unfold its immanent power, a language [*Sprache*] that corresponds to Benjamin's theoretical notion necessarily withdraws itself from an elementary subject-predicate relation. This means, first and foremost, that Benjamin must reject a notion of language as a system of signs."

[328] Bröker, "Sprache," 749.

[329] "*Das aller Phänomenalität entrückte Sein, dem allein diese Gewalt eignet, ist das des Namens. Es bestimmt die Gegebenheit der Ideen.*"

[330] "*Der Name hat im Bereich der Sprache einzig diesen Sinn und diese unvergleichlich hohe Bedeutung: daß er das innerste Wesen der Sprache selbst ist.*"

[331] "*Der Name ist dasjenige,* durch *das sich nichts mehr, und* in *dem die Sprache selbst und absolut sich mitteilt.*"

philosophy of language seems to be a theory of the experiential encounter with the manifold at the level of a "primordial" perception.

Thinking of language as a primordial encounter beyond the realm of cognitive meaning can help make sense of some of the more enigmatic statements in "On Language," such as, "All nature, insofar as it communicates itself, communicates itself in language and so finally in man" (*SW1*, 65; *GS2*, 144.)[332] That is, if human subjectivity is conceived as a medium along Hegelian lines, which Benjamin's texts on language seem to imply, a medium in which, not through which, language takes place, then all nature communicates itself to subjectivity in its state of being a *Ding-an-sich* and can be "named," that is encountered in its actuality. Benjamin's conception of language "knows no means, no object, and no addressee of communication" (*SW1*, 65; *GS2*, 144.)[333] For Benjamin, ideas-as-names are the grammar and syntax of a phenomenology of experience.

Naming, however, does not encompass the encounter with the manifold as such, but is descriptive of a potential encounter, perhaps only an ideal encounter. To name is to stand in a correct relationship to truth. It is to be right with God. For Benjamin, the model of his notion of language as phenomenological encounter is found in the two creation stories of Genesis. "In a sense," writes Rochlitz, "the biblical text plays a role analogous to tragic texts and pre-Socratic thought in Nietzsche's philosophy: It is a

---

[332] "*Alle Natur, sofern sie sich mitteilt, teilt sich in der Sprache mit, also letzten Endes im Menschen.*"

[333] "[...] *keinen Gegenstand und keinen Adressaten der Mitteilung.*"

primitive wisdom lost by modernity."[334] Although Benjamin values the Bible as a source of *Ur*-wisdom, this does not mean that he reads Genesis as a pious biblical exegete. Benjamin reads Genesis as a philosopher, that is, gnoseologically. "If in what follows," he notes in "On Language,":

> the nature of language is considered on the basis of the first chapter of Genesis, the object is neither biblical interpretation nor subjection of the Bible to objective consideration as revealed truth, but the discovery of what emerges of itself from the biblical text with regards to the nature of language and the Bible is only initially indispensable for this purpose because the present argument broadly follows it in presupposing language as an ultimate reality, perceptible only in its manifestation, inexplicable and mystical (*SW1,* 67; *GS2*, 147.)[335]

God's act of creation through the word, and later Adam's act of naming are suggestive of how language can be conceived beyond sign-signifier relation. Taking the biblical creation stories as his model for a non-referential, indeed, a non-"linguistic" theory of language, has exegetical precedence. In his gloss on the first creation story Augustine asks, "But how did you [God] speak?"[336] Augustine's answer to his own query is that,

---

[334] Rochlitz, *The Disenchantment of Art,* 17.

[335] "*Wenn im folgenden das Wesen der Sprache auf Grund der ersten Genesiskapitel betrachtet wird, so soll damit weder Bibelinterpretation als Zweck verfolgt noch auch die Bibel an dieser Stelle objektiv als offenbarte Wahrheit dem Nachdenken zugrunde gelegt werden, sondern das, was aus dem Bibeltext in Ansehung der Natur der Sprache selbst sich ergibt, soll aufgefunden werden; und die Bibel ist* zunächst *in dieser Absicht nur darum unersetzlich, weil diese Ausführungen im Prinzipiellen ihr darin folgen, daß in ihnen die Sprache als seine letzte, nur in ihrer Entfaltung zu betrachtende, unerklärliche und mystische Wirklichkeit vorausgesetzt wird.*"

[336] Augustine, *Confessions*, 258.

"For your Word is *not speech* in which each part comes to an end when it has been spoken, giving place to the next, so that finally the whole may be uttered" (emphasis added.)[337] For Augustine, God's language, let us call it the language of truth, is not a language according to Benjamin's description of "bourgeois" theory. God, in the first creation story, models the real purpose of language, which is not to describe, but to create. God's language is both creative and finished creation at once.

In biblical exegeses, it has been suggested that the two creation stories, far from being contradictory accounts that a pious but essentially ignorant redactor mistakenly glued together as, for example, Nietzsche suggests, but rather already encapsulate the fundamental relationship that is the core theme of biblical literature: the relationship between God and humanity. In this reading, the first creation story is narrated from a "cosmo-centric" perspective, while the second represents creation from an anthropocentric (perhaps more accurately, androcentric) perspective. If God-as-truth represents the abstract determination of language as creative, it is Adam who represents the ideal of language in its human dimension. As Benjamin notes, God's creation remains incomplete until "things receive their names from man, from whom in name language alone speaks" (*SW1*, 65; *GS2*, 144.)[338] For Benjamin, it is Adam, more so than Plato who is "the father of philosophy" (*Tragic Drama*, 37; *GS2*, 217,)[339] since Adam is the model for humanity living in the presence of truth. "The task of philosophy,"

---

[337] Ibid., 259.

[338] "*Gottes Schöpfung vollendet sich, indem die Dinge ihren Namen vom Menschen erhalten, aus dem im Namen die Sprache allein spricht.*"

[339] The full German sentence reads: "*In solcher Haltung aber steht zuletzt nicht Platon, sondern Adam, der Vater der Menschen als Vater der Philosophie, da.*"

Benjamin wrote Rang, "is to name the idea as Adam named nature [...]" (*SW1*, 389.) Adam, "in whom language itself speaks," is the being in whom the encounter with the manifold takes place in paradise, that is, it is divine, which is to say that it is true. Adam's act of naming means that he "sees," he comprehends the essence of the manifold. Essence, it will be recalled, however, is not in the object alone, but is constituted relationally with the subject. Rochlitz makes the connection to rescue explicit:

> Just as man in general saves things that are in themselves mute by naming them and thus includes them in Creation, the philosopher, as Benjamin conceives it, has the task of saving the mental being [*Geist*] of art and poetry by stripping away their thingness and bringing them back to the bosom of pure language.[340]

Benjamin's theory of language as a phenomenological encounter is in stark contrast to what he derides as "bourgeois" linguistic theory. His critique of "bourgeois" linguistics is simultaneously a critique of positivism and of the methods that inform analytic and positivist social theory more generally. A "bourgeois," theory of language "holds that the means of communication is the word, its object factual, and its addressee a human being" (*SW1*, 65; *GS2*, 144.)[341] The contrast between actual and bourgeois theories of language is elaborated in the essay by recounting the second creation story, which ends with the banishment of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. Eden, as Benjamin describes it, is a place in which the essence of the manifold is immediately accessible. "Adam's action of naming things is so far removed from play or caprice that

---

[340] Rochlitz, *The Disenchantment of Art*, 14.

[341] "[...] *die bürgerliche Auffassung der Sprache,* [...] *besagt: Das Mittel der Mitteilung ist das Wort, ihr Gegenstand die Sache, ihr Adressat ein Mensch.*"

it actually confirms the state of paradise as a state in which there is no need to struggle with the communicative significance of words" (*Tragic Drama*, 37; *GS1*, 216.)[342] "Satan,"[343] who is here the stand-in for the bourgeoisie, tempts Adam and Eve with the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. This tree can be regarded as a merism for all knowledge. Knowledge, as we recall from the previous chapter, is in its essence alienated from truth. That is, Satan extends the promise of analytic communicative language, based on distinction and judgment, the very type of language and knowledge which a rigorous monotheism must disallow with respect to "knowing," or "speaking of" God. With respect to knowledge, Benjamin suggests that "There is no evil in the world. It arises in man himself, with the desire for knowledge, or rather judgment" (*Tragic Drama*, 233; *GS1*, 407.)[344] Knowledge is possession. It differs radically from the structure of truth, which, because it is infinite, cannot be possessed. The elements of truth receive their own unique names, as Adam named the beasts. The name is that "linguistic" category which approximates the infinite nature of truth by being utterly unique. "[...] the proper name is the word of God in human sounds" (*SW1*, 69; *GS2*, 150.)[345] Whereas the "word" of post-lapsarian speech, which is fallen language, imperfect language, bourgeois communicative language, always falls short of being able to articulate the

---

[342] "*Das adamistische Namengeben ist so weit entfernt Spiel and Willkür zu sein, daß vielmehr gerade in ihm der paradiesische Stand sich als solcher bestätigt, der mit der mitteilenden Bedeutung der Worte noch nicht zu ringen hatte.*"

[343] A re-reading of Genesis will show that the tempter is not in fact referred to as the devil, or Satan, but rather as the "shrewdest of all animals."

[344] "*Dies* [*das Böse*] *ist nicht in der Welt. Es setzt sich mit der Lust am Wissen erst, vielmehr am Urteil, in dem Menschen selber.*"

[345] "[...] *denn der Eigenname ist Wort Gottes in menschlichen Lauten.*"

infinity of a phenomenological encounter. In Benjamin's distinction between name and a post-lapsarian word there seems an instructive foreshadowing of Levinas' notion of the face.

The essential problem with post-lapsarian language is noted by Peter Szondi, who writes:

> Benjamin seems to have shared Proust's view that the enumeration of objects in a description can never lead to truth and that truth first appears at the moment when the author takes two different objects and reveals their essence by linking them in a metaphor based on a common property.[346]

The Proustian critique that descriptive language cannot articulate the essence of an experiential encounter is already theorized in Hegel's *Phenomenology*, with which Benjamin's theory of divine and fallen language shares noteworthy correspondences. In the first section of the *Phenomenology*, Hegel demonstrates that naïve consciousness – one may be tempted to call it positivist, "bourgeois," or perhaps even "Satanic" consciousness – experiences a continuous negation when it attempts to express the self-evident given-ness of the content of its encounter with the manifold. Like dry sand grains slipping through a fist desperately trying to hold on to them, Hegel shows that naïve consciousness discovers it can never actually name the very given-ness that is the essence of its encounter. As he explains:

---

[346] Peter Szondi, "Walter Benjamin's City Portraits," in *On Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Recollections*, ed. Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1988), 28.

> The *Here pointed out*, to which I hold fast, is similarly a *this* Here which, in fact, is *not* this Here, but a Before and Behind, an Above and Below, a Right and Left. The Above is itself similarly this manifold otherness of above, below, etc. The Here, which was supposed to have been pointed out, vanishes in other Heres, but these likewise vanish. What is pointed out, held fast, and abides, is a *negative* This, which *is* negative only when the Heres are taken as they should be, but, in being so taken, they supersede themselves; what abides is a simple complex of many Heres. The Here that is *meant* would be the point; but it *is* not: on the contrary, when it is pointed out as something that *is*, the pointing-out shows itself to be not an immediate knowing [of the point], but a movement from the Here that is *meant* through many Heres into the universal Here which is a simple plurality of Heres, just as the day is a simple plurality of Nows.[347]

The words of a fallen humanity are words that cannot reach what they attempt to name. "[...] the thing in itself has no word, being created from God's word and known in its name by the human word" (*SW1*, 69; *GS2*, 150.)[348]

There is an important distinction, however, between "God's word," "Adam's name," and the post-lapsarian word of the bourgeoisie. The name is given in the primordial perception, not in the snake's "language" of signs. The human word in its perfection, that is, in an ideal speech situation, to reformulate a Habermasian phrase, is Adam's ability to name, which does not take place at the verbal level, but is perceptual.

---

[347] Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 64; (108.)

[348] "[...] *die Sache an sich kein Wort hat, geschaffen ist sie aus Gottes Wort und erkannt in ihrem Namen nach dem Menschenwort.*"

His ability to name is no longer accessible "after" the introduction of knowledge-oriented communication. Any attempt to name the essence of an encounter devolves into an endless description, where the object recedes as if in equal proportion to the number of adjectives appended to it. It remains an act of violence, which always end in failure. "The tree of knowledge did not stand in the garden of God in order to dispense information on good and evil but as an emblem of judgment over the questioner" (*SW1*, 72; *GS2*, 154.)[349] Words of fallen humanity are inscribed within the domain of knowledge. For Benjamin, the inability of post-lapsarian language to approach truth is the basis for turning away from language understood in terms of "bourgeois" linguistics, where signs dominate the particularity of that which they signify.[350] Benjamin turns instead to a relational model of philosophic representation, the template of which is given by the figure of the translator, art critic, philosopher-theologian, and biblical exegete. It is Hamann who provides for Benjamin the general trajectory for a theory of language and translation as related to the divine, when he writes that,

> To speak is to translate – from an angelic language into a human language that is, to translate thoughts into words – things into names – images into signs, which can be poetic or curiological, historic or symbolic or hieroglyphic – and philosophical or characteristic.[351]

---

[349] "*Der Baum der Erkenntnis stand nicht wegen der Aufschlüsse über Gut und Böse, die er zu geben vermocht hatte, im Garten Gottes, sondern als Wahrzeichen des Gerichts über den Fragenden.*

[350] See, Origen, "On First Principles," 204: "Therefore, everyone who is concerned with truth should be little concerned with names and words [....]"

[351] Hamann, *Writings on Philosophy and Language*, 66.

Benjamin's theory of art criticism helps shed light on his notion of translation as a method suited to engaging reality understood as structured by internal relations. De Man notes:

> The translation canonizes, freezes, an original and shows in the original a mobility, an instability, which at first one did not notice. The act of critical, theoretical reading performed by a critic like Friedrich Schlegel and performed by literary theory in general – by means of which the original work is not imitated or reproduced but is to some extent put in motion, de-canonized, questioned in a way which undoes its claim to canonical authority – is similar to what a translator performs.[352]

Benjamin's notion of a relational structure of truth echoes Schlegel's aesthetic theory, in which a work of art is thought to call out for its own critique. For Benjamin as for Schlegel, truth emerges in the relationship between two or more elements, specifically between a human subject and the object observed: art, history, politics, the social. The notion of "observe" in this context is perhaps too passive. For the dialectic to produce a constellation of truth, the work of art is not simply observed but critiqued. In Lutz R. Koepnick's description of Benjamin's notion of critique, we can hear echoes of the destructive role of the concept broached in Chapter Two. Koepnick explains, "the critic has to destroy the artwork's appearance if he or she desires access to its inner truth content; criticism entails the art of mortifying the work and its mythic totality, its appeal

---

[352] Paul De Man, "'Conclusions' Walter Benjamin's 'The Task of the Translator' Messenger Lecture, Cornell University, March 4, 1983," *Yale French Studies* 69 (1985): 35.

to beauty, in order to unearth the kernel of truth that is hidden underneath the work's material content."[353] Wiesenthal suggests that Benjamin's notion of critique can also be understood in Kantian terms, as the reconstruction of the realm of ideas, which, she argues, he equates with the perfection inherent in the notion of creation in Genesis. The task of science (*Wissenschaft*) and philosophy is to re-establish the "eternal" perfection always already present within creation.[354] Here the notion of mystic and critic converge. As Rochlitz observes, "Criticism and translation are messianic functions in the process of history; they work to restore the purity of the name."[355] That is, much like the Kabbalist who is charged with restoring the shattered vessels of God's creation (*tikkum olam*), the critic attempts to restore the original unity in the realm of ideas that reflect eternal perfection. This messianic task is accomplished through the work of critique, which has a similar structure to translation and biblical commentary.

Benjamin's theory of a philosophical method based on a relational ontology, for which translation is a paradigmatic model, is also formulated in the aforementioned distinction between symbol and allegory. Lukács suggests the idea of translatability of Benjamin's distinction beyond the realm of aesthetic theory, when he writes that, "Benjamin's study [...] starts from the idea that allegory and symbol express fundamentally divergent human responses to reality."[356] For Benjamin, the symbol

---

[353] Lutz P. Koepnick, "The Spectacle, the *Trauerspiel*, and the Politics of Resolution: Benjamin Reading the Baroque Reading Weimar," *Critical Inquiry* 22, no. 2 (1996): 274.
[354] Wiesenthal, *Zur Wissenschaftstheorie Walter Benjamins*, 47 – 55.
[355] Rochlitz, *The Disenchantment of Art*, 28.
[356] Georg Lukács, "On Walter Benjamin," *New Left Review* 1, no. 110 (July-August 1978): 86.

gestures towards totality. It is a closed system, in which the signifier dominates the particularity of the signified. As Adorno argues, the total subsumption of the particular under the universal is an act of violence, that is, the particularity of the particular is destroyed in the movement of the symbol. This is also the movement of post-lapsarian speech, which according to bourgeois linguistic theory is taken to be the essence of language.

As Szondi suggests, the allegorical, by contrast, opens up a space of uncertainty and plurality. In an allegorical reading, there is no one final answer, but rather an interplay between often mutually irreconcilable interpretations. "With every idea the moment of expression coincides with a veritable eruption of images, which gives rise to a chaotic mass of metaphors" (*Tragic Drama*, 173; *GS1*, 349.)[357] This situation leads to a semiotic freefall, in which, "Any person, any object, any relationship," writes Benjamin of allegory during the Baroque, "can mean absolutely anything else" (*Tragic Drama*, 175; *GS1*, 351.)[358] Benjamin traces the open-endedness of allegory to the fact that Baroque artists, especially painters and dramatists, tended to draw tropes from two culturally distinct semiotic sources, Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian. As a result, signification was equivocal, open-ended, and thus, in need of interpretation, since a given "sign" seen in the context of a Greco-Roman interpretive schema might mean something radically different, when viewed from a Judeo-Christian perspective. An example is the depiction

---

[357] "*Für jeden Einfall trifft der Augenblick des Ausdrucks zusammen mit einer wahren Bilderuption, als deren Niederschlag die Menge der Metaphern chaotisch ausgestreut liegt.*"

[358] "*Jede Person, jedwedes Ding, jedes Verhältnis kann ein beliebiges anderes bedeuten.*"

of musical instruments in early modern European graphic art. While a certain instrument, such as the lute, might be the synecdoche for a given Greco-Roman hero or god – one might think of Orpheus or Pan in this regard – in the medieval and early modern Christian traditions, instruments tended to be equated with sin, with earthly frivolity and, therefore, with the devil. In Hieronymous Bosch's "Garden of Earthly Delights,"[359] for example, hell is strewn with lutes and lyres. However, when the interpretive register of the painting is not as obvious as in the "Garden of Earthly Delights," the referent of the sign is in doubt. The interpretation cannot be final. An original work of art always invites a reinterpretation that could be diametrically opposed to the first. Allegory, then, suggests the manner in which the real is to be theorized. Elements of the social text are not fully determined signs that necessarily relate to certain sets of signification, but require constant re-reading and re-interpretation.

Benjamin hints at the relationship between allegory and the theory of rescue, which is, like translation and biblical commentary, the template for his philosophical method. "[A]n appreciation of the transience of things, and the concern to rescue them for eternity, is one of the strongest impulses in allegory" (*Tragic Drama*, 223; *GS1*, 397.)[360] The open-endedness of allegory also sheds light on the status of the essence of the phenomenal which is to be rescued. The allegorical intention is "dialectical in character" (*Tragic Drama*, 166;*GS1*, 342.)[361] Levinas' suggestion that essence is

---

[359] Hieronymus Bosch, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, El Prado Museum.
[360] "*Ist doch die Einsicht ins Vergängliche der Dinge und jene Sorge, sie ins Ewige zu retten, im Allegorischen eins der stärksten Motive.*"
[361] "[...] *Intention dialektischer Art.*"

determined by interest is instructive here.[362] That is to say, in Benjamin's work, the essence of the manifold is not some ontological entity existing independently of the subject that, like in positivism, simply needs to be uncovered. Rather, subjectivity co-determines what shines forth as essence. For example, Marx's interest lay in uncovering the hidden structures of Capital. It was this interest that determined what was brought into the foreground and what could be de-emphasized and left in the background. For Weber, by contrast, whose interest lay in exposing the ideational vectors that helped pave the way for Capital to take hold, the constellation of essences was quite different. The emphasis on essence in the discussion of Benjamin's method should not be taken to mean that he engages in a certain fundamental ontology, but rather that the truth of philosophy exists somewhere "in-between" the objective and subjective dimensions. "[To] some degree," writes Benjamin in a related context, "all great texts contain their potential translation between the lines; this is true above all of sacred writings. The interlinear version of the Scriptures is the prototype or ideal of all translation" (*SW1*, 263; *GS4*, 21.)[363] This ideal of translation is also Benjamin's ideal for a method of reading the social as such. Since he argues that narrative, symbol and "sign"-language (that is, "bourgeois" referential language) determine one essence while excluding all others, that is, they foreground one set of interests while suppressing the rest, these modes of theorizing are as much tools for domination as they are modes of encountering the real.

---

[362] Emmanuel Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being: or, Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, Pa: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 4.

[363] "*Denn in irgendeinem Grade enthalten alle großen Schriften, im höchsten aber die heiligen, zwischen den Zeilen ihre virtuelle Übersetzung. Die Interlinearversion des heiligen Textes ist das Urbild oder Ideal aller Übersetzung.*"

Like the symbol, and like post-lapsarian speech in general, narratives tend to dominate the particularity of the object in such a manner that the multiplicity of interpretations are occluded. Benjamin argues this point with respect to historical narratives which tend to be the stories of victors while those sacrificed on the "slaughter bench of history" rarely have their experiences included in the victor's canon. A certain nuance is required here to understand what Benjamin has in mind. He is certainly not opposed to textual interpretation. Biblical commentary, translation and art criticism, as I have suggested, are the templates for his philosophical approach. By his own admission, it was his conceit to become Germany's foremost literary critic in the Weimar period, and his commentaries on Kafka, Dostoyevsky, Proust, Poe and Baudelaire, obviously demonstrate that he was not "against" narrativity, whatever that might mean. However, as a template for historical, social or philosophical analysis, the movement of narrative, like that of the symbol, and communicative "sign"-language, is suspect. As any good orator knows, the essence of storytelling is found in bringing to the fore the essential elements of the narrative, while suppressing the nonessential. Determining what is nonessential, however, is a question of perspective, of interest, and always entails disregarding elements that from another perspective might be deemed relevant. For the conquerors, it is their victory and not the injustice they inflicted by their actions that tends to be regarded as essential and thus deemed valuable. For the vanquished, however, it may be quite the reverse.

Benjamin, therefore, suggests that the template for a philosophy directed towards truth is found not in signs, nor bourgeois language, nor mathematical formulas, nor

narratives. For Benjamin truth crystallizes in images. "Only images in the mind vitalize the will" (*SW1,* 466; *GS4*, 116.)[364] The image, rather than the story, is what is aligned to the allegorical method, and therefore, also with the biblical naming dimension of non-communicative language. An excellent example of writing in images are the "Theses," generally, especially the first of the puppet and the dwarf cited in the introduction. The text is not a narrative as Aristotle defines it, as having a beginning, middle and end. Instead, the first thesis is really the description of an image. It has a certain static quality. There is no narrative movement. Its composition is closer to that of a painting than a story, in that conceptual oppositions are used like contrasting colours to structure the scene: The living dwarf in opposition to the inanimate puppet, theology in opposition to "historical materialism."

It may be Goethe who provided Benjamin with the template for writing in "images," when, in *Elective Affinities*, he describes the strange bourgeois pastime of staging famous paintings with live people, the *tableaux vivants*. Benjamin, however, regarded the dialectical-image, or what I have previously referred to as the thought-image, to be his own unique contribution to philosophy. Despite Goethe's precedence and despite Benjamin's insistence, the dialectical-image also seems to be at least somewhat indebted to Bergson's "memory-image." The connection to Bergson will prove useful, as he provides some theoretical insights that can help illuminate what amounts to Benjamin's method of philosophical presentation, as well as the organizing principle of much of his later work. The dialectical-image, as Benjamin developed it, was

---

[364] "*Lebendig nährt den Willen nur das vorgestellte Bild.*"

received with skepticism and confusion by some of his contemporaries and later readers. The resistance is perhaps understandable. There is an inherent contradiction between the implied static quality of an image and the dynamic process of the dialectic. The essence of dialectic is motion, time and history; the essence of the image is its resistance to change. To speak of a dialectical-image, then, seems to make as much sense as to claim that someone stood still while walking.

Adorno is perhaps the most vehement critic of Benjamin's invention. As Habermas explains, "Adorno does not see how legitimate it is to want to carry out the project for a primary history of modernity which aims at decodifying a semantics that has been buried and is threatened with forgetfulness – by hermeneutical means, through the interpretation of dialectical-images."[365] Notwithstanding Adorno's objections, there is textual precedence for Benjamin's approach in Hegel's *Phenomenology*, which ends by referencing history as a gallery of images. "This Becoming presents a slow-moving succession of Spirits, a gallery of images, each of which, endowed with all the riches of Spirit, moves thus slowly just because the Self has to penetrate and digest this entire wealth of its substance."[366] Benjamin's reference to a dialectical-image should be read in conjunction with Schlegel's aesthetic theory in which the exegete stands in a dialectical relationship to the real *qua* interpreter, which "crystallizes in an image." Here it may be helpful to refer to Bergson, who elucidates the logic of thinking in images, when he writes, that:

---

[365] Habermas, "Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique," 115.
[366] Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 492 (808.)

> Representation is there, but always virtual – being neutralized at the very moment when it becomes actual, but the obligation to continue itself and to lose itself in something else. To obtain this conversion from the virtual to the actual, it would be necessary, not to throw more light on the object, but on the contrary, to obscure some of its aspects, to diminish it by the greater part of itself, so that the remainder, instead of being encased in its surroundings, as a thing, should detach itself from these as a picture.[367]

Later Bergson notes that, "to perceive means to immobilize."[368] And Ansgar Hillach helpfully suggests that the ambiguity inherent in the image and the conflicting interpretations that result from it are the sustenance from which the dialectic draws its strength; these contradictions are what drives the exegete towards the goal of a higher sublation.[369]

I suggest that Benjamin's "pictorial" style of philosophical writing utilizes the same strategy that religious texts employ when attempting to articulate a truth that resists linguistic or mathematical formulations. I believe that it is Plato who provides Benjamin with the precedent for this strategy. Before proceeding, however, an important caveat needs to be born in mind. While I maintain that Plato can in some sense be regarded as a model for Benjamin's method of philosophical presentation, this claim only references the fact that both Benjamin and Plato suppose that truth cannot be directly articulated,

---

[367] Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 36.
[368] Ibid., 208.
[369] Ansgar Hillach, "Dialektisches Bild," in *Benjamins Begriffe*, vol. 1, ed. Michael Opitz and Erdmut Wizisla (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2000).

that truth cannot simply be predicated. The difference between their thought is of course significant, evinced, for instance, in the differently valued status of the image in their philosophies. Benjamin's writing is "pictorial," while Plato disdained images. Benjamin is suspicious of narrative, while Plato uses elaborate stories to support his arguments. Nonetheless, while Plato and Benjamin disagree about how the non-linguistic, non-predicative, inexpressible nature of truth can best be represented, Plato does furnish Benjamin with the broad outlines of a strategy.

Plato is not generally considered a religious philosopher, which is an anachronistic reading of his works that, I believe, mistakenly projects the modern religious-philosophical divide back to a historical period when that distinction was not meaningful. Regardless of how "religious" we might deem his works to be, I claim that Plato provides Benjamin with the theoretical framework for how to write "religiously," that is to how to express truths that are to some extent metaphysical since they escape the confines of a verificationist discourse. Benjamin's method of presentation is the second moment of his theory of rescue. His philosophy and his manner of presentation, are themselves the attempted rescue of truths that have eluded positivist social theory.

Evidence for the claim that Plato can in part be read as a model for Benjamin's method of philosophical presentation is found in *Tragic Drama*, where the *Symposium* is explicitly referenced. That it should be the *Symposium* of all the possible Platonic dialogues Benjamin cites is telling. Speth, for example, regards the inclusion of the *Symposium* as Benjamin's rebuke of Natorp's overly logical interpretation of Plato's

theory of ideas.[370] Of special note in this regard is that Apollodorous, the narrator of the *Symposium*, is twice removed from the conversation he is reporting on. This removal can be regarded as Plato's poetic device gesturing to the distance of *logos* from truth. Like Benjamin, Plato's Socrates steadfastly refuses to give straightforward philosophical definitions, because, according to Bröcker, Plato understood that truth was beyond the grasp of *logos*.[371] Instead, Socrates' answers are long dialogues in which an idea is represented, but not directly articulated. Analytic concepts such as triangle can usually be relatively easily defined. Defining ideas is more complex. Mittelstrasse notes that for the Marburg school, the reduction of the idea to a scientific hypothesis meant that the idea could be expressed in true sentences from which more true sentences could be derived.[372] For Benjamin as for Plato, ideas cannot simply be predicated. The *Republic* for example, is an attempt to answer the question, "What is the form of Justice?" The dialogue does not propose a simple analytic definition of justice, but takes a long detour, which itself is the answer.

A further indication that Plato can be deemed an important influence on Benjamin's method of philosophic presentation, becomes apparent when one takes into account the similar historical-philosophical context to which both Benjamin and Plato respond. In Plato, Benjamin discovers a "brother in arms," who faced many of the same challenges presented by modernity, notably the problems arising from a *Weltanschauung* in which science determines the final horizon of truth. Plato provides an exemplary

---

[370] Speth, *Wahrheit und Ästhetik*, 231.
[371] Bröker, "Sprache," 755.
[372] Rochlitz, *The Disenchantment of Art*, 23.

answer to the questions Benjamin is facing. Like Benjamin's struggle against the lack of meaning implied in the scientistic discourse embraced by positivists, Plato's system can be read as a response to the new Ionian physics which, he felt, undermined traditional Hellenistic values and led to a de-humanized rationalism. I follow Gregory Vlastos' reading, when he suggests that Plato's main enemies were the "modern scientists" whose mechanistic cosmology also gave rise to atheism.[373] Vlastos argues that for Plato, the "basic error" uniting such diverse pre-Socratic thinkers as Anaximander, Parmenides, Leucippus and Democritus, was the supposition that "nature is a self-regulating system, and is not governed by the art of a divine mind."[374] That a "causal matrix" provides a full explanatory model of existence, led, Plato argued, to the relativist subjectivism and nihilism of the Sophists, for whom there was no fundamental truth, and who, therefore, felt no moral compunction with respect to the ends to which they applied their rhetorical arts. To counter the nihilism and relativism of the Sophists, Plato developed his theory of the forms which reference an actual eternal reality, one that is, nonetheless, not directly observable in the phenomenal world. It is worth noting in the present context that Plato's *Timaeus* is a direct response to the absence of human meaning he attributed to the philosophies of the Ionian physicists. In *Timaeus*, Plato attempts to construct a philosophy of nature in which a creator god, the demiurge, is given pride of

---

[373] Gregory Vlastos, *Platonic Studies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 158 – 159.
[374] Ibid., 159.

place and where meaning continues to reside in a world alive with "the world soul."[375] Not surprisingly, *Timaeus* is also a seminal source for the Neoplatonic tradition, especially the Christian Neoplatonists searching for a basis for the unification of biblical theology and pagan philosophy.

I suggest that Plato's rhetorical use of the poetic and the religio-mythic to express the inexpressible is essentially the same strategy employed by Benjamin when he incorporates the mythico-theological. Both are attempts to represent a realm of truth, specifically a realm of meaning, not incorporated within a mechanistically defined cosmos. The connection between poetry, myth and religion is to be found primarily in the fact that all three are modes of knowing that transgress a scientistic discourse. It will be recalled that in the pagan religious context of classical Greek antiquity, the poetic, especially the poetry of myth, was the privileged device by which to transmit and reaffirm the social taxonomy of the culture, its religious, ethical, normative self-identity. The paragon is Homer, whose *Iliad* and *Odyssey* played a role in ancient Greece similar to that of the Bible in the European middle ages. In this sense, the poetic, the mythic, and the religious, which I will refer to collectively as *muthos* – which must be kept distinct from Benjamin's understanding of the mythic – stand in opposition to the verificationist discourse of *logos*. Here I am following Luc Brisson who helpfully elaborates the distinction between *logos* and *muthos* as found in the Platonic dialogues: "The *muthos/logos* dichotomy can be interpreted not only as the opposition between falsifiable

---

[375] Plato, *Timaeus*, ed. Oskar Piest, trans. Francis M. Cornford (New York: Macmillian Publishing Company, 1959).

discourse and unfalsifiable discourse [...] but also as the opposition between narrative discourse – or, more simply, a story – and argumentative discourse."[376]

It is in the sense that *muthos* is both a story as well as a non-falsifiable discourse that I note a relationship between the poetic, the mythic and the content of the religious in Benjamin's work. *Muthos* comprise the content of many, perhaps most, religious texts, certainly those in the Judeo-Christian and European pagan traditions. The phrase, "Jesus wept," for example, need not be read, as many positivists are wont, as a falsifiable truth statement that could be corroborated with other texts of the same period to determine its historical veracity. Rather "Jesus wept," could just as well be evaluated as a "poetic" expression, which nonetheless points to a truth. As was suggested in Chapter One, a play, even one which depicts an entirely fictional set of characters in an entirely fictional place, can still articulate a truth not present at the literal level of the text. Unlike works of fiction, in which there may or may not be a deeper meaning implied, the very form of religious texts like the Bible present themselves as truth. Claiming that the Bible *is* the word of God means that it is true, in whatever sense that might be taken. The assertion that it is true is a far more radical claim than is found in the genre of fiction. That is to say, while the content of many religious texts is structured in much the same way as works of fiction, the form of the text implies that it is oriented towards an ultimate truth. This implies that the genre of religious writing cannot be easily contained within a

---

[376] Luc Brisson, *Plato the Myth Maker*, ed. and trans. Gerard Naddaf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 112.

logos/muthos dichotomy. Instead, religious texts, like many philosophical texts such as those by Plato, necessarily include both *logos* and *muthos*.

At the same time, however; *muthos* in the sense of a non-verifiable discourse has been, perhaps justly, critiqued by philosophers, not least among them Plato, for making the false appear true. This aspect of Plato's philosophy is not to be denied. For Plato the good or the true can only be arrived at through dialectic. The dialogues are an attempt to demonstrate the superiority of the apprehension of truth over folly, notably of Plato's "idealism" over the relativism of the Sophists. In this more limited sense, the truth signaled by *muthos* is verifiable, since one's understanding of it can be shown, through reasoned argument to be sound or faulty. On the other hand the truth to which *muthos* orients is not of the same status as that of a scientifically verifiable statements of fact. The very ambiguity of the truly true is what makes *muthos* a necessity in the sense of a narrative, and it also entails that a trace of elusiveness which cannot be verified remains incorporated in the concept.

That is not to say, however, as some readers have supposed, that Plato regards the inclusion of *muthos* as a non-verifiable discourse as illegitimate. *Muthos* is necessary as long as it remains informed by *logos*. Even if *muthos* cannot be justified by *logos*, this does not necessitate the supposition that Plato rejects *muthos* as narrative, which as his dialogues indicate he clearly does not. I suggest that there are (at least) two ways in which *muthos* is expressed in the Platonic dialogues which are structurally related to Benjamin's method of presentation. The first is the relatively self-evident inclusion of myths in the content of the dialogues that refer to Hellenistic paganism. I claim that the

inclusion of these myths, like the inclusion of religious language in Benjamin's social criticism, serves an epistemic function in that they articulate an aspect of reality not easily represented by a mathematico-scientistic discourse. The second, and related sense in which the *muthos* structures the dialogues, and Benjamin's works is in its very *form*. In Plato, but not in Benjamin, the dialogue is framed as an enacted encounter. Brisson explains that, "In order to imitate a reality which escapes all definitive description, we utilize a double imitation that substitutes for the first model another model which is accessible to the senses."[377] That is the status of *muthos* in Plato's works, a non-sensuous reality that points to a deeper reality that cannot be otherwise articulated, similar to Zizek's assertion that a play is often "more real" than the real itself.[378]

The supposed split between *logos* and *muthos* that the *Republic* is to have codified, does not exist. It is worth remembering that Plato did not, in fact, expel all the poets in the *Republic*. Only those poets of "mere entertainment," those who produced "immoral" poetry were thrown out, but a higher better poetry was nonetheless required for his perfect state. Plato did not reject poetry, nor the aesthetic modes of knowing. He shunned poetry not grounded by goodness and morality. Goodness and morality, or what amounts to the same thing in Plato, truth, cannot be known within the orbit of poetry itself, with *muthos* alone, but only by reasoned inquiry, through *logos*. Plato argued for a poetry, a myth, a religion, that is informed by *logos*, not a *logos* without a *muthos*. If Plato's *Republic* is read in conjunction with his other dialogues, the supposition that he

---

[377] Brisson, *Plato the Myth Maker*, 103.
[378] See for example, Slavoj Zizek, "The Matrix, or Two Sides of Perversion."

attempted to define a realm for reason, entirely unencumbered by the poetic, is unsustainable. In the *Phaedrus* for example, Socrates gives a lengthy description of what constitutes "good speaking," that is speech directed to truth. Good speech, as he defines it, results when myths and fables are used to point to a hidden reality. Also in Book II of the *Republic*, explaining the education of youth to Adeimantus, Socrates states, "Don't you realize [...] that we start by telling children stories which are, by and large, untrue, though they contain elements of truth?"[379] Contrary to the Nietzschean reading that Plato abhorred the poetic, the mythic, the narrative, the guiding thread through all his dialogues is the desire to establish a *logos* informed by *muthos* and conversely to ensure that *muthos* is reasoned, that it remains rooted in *logos*. Plato's philosophy is itself the paragon of the new moral and religious poetry, a didactic poetry meant to lead to a better, more meaningful existence.[380] Plato saw himself as an improved Homer, his philosophy as the better poetry, and his epic hero Socrates as the new Achilles and Odysseus in one. The

---

[379] Plato, *The Republic*, 71 (II 377a.)

[380] See, Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York, New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 154, and, Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, ed. Raymond Geuss and Ronald Spiers trans. Ronald Spiers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). In the *Genealogy of Morals*, for example, Nietzsche states that, "Plato versus Homer, that is the complete, the genuine antagonism." As Nietzsche explains in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Plato introduced a schism between the Dionysian and the Apollonian drives, that is between the aesthetic, emotive and non-rational modes of knowing on the one hand the, and a cold, disinterested reason, embodied in the person of Socrates on the other. Nietzsche, of course, believes that Plato got it wrong, and therefore his *Birth of Tragedy* is a consistent attack on the separation of the Dionysian from Apollonian impulses. For Nietzsche, Socrates is closer to the positivists than to artists, enraptured by "science" and the power of reason. "Anyone who recalls the immediate effects produced by this restlessly advancing spirit of science will recognize at once how *myth* was destroyed by it, and how this destruction drove poetry from its natural, ideal soil, so that it became homeless from that point onwards" (82.)

young Benjamin sublates the dichotomy between *logos* and *muthos* in Plato when he notes in a preliminary study to his book on German baroque drama that, "Socrates: with this figure, Plato annihilates the old myth while adopting it" (*SW1*, 52; *GS2*, 130.)[381]

Like Plato, Benjamin frequently includes mythic and religious references in the content of his essays, and, like Plato, his style of writing, and its form, are both literature and philosophy at once. The texture of Benjamin's essays militates against any self-evident philosophical-literary distinction. The reason for this literary approach, as I have already suggested, is to be found in the conviction shared by Plato, that truth is utterly transcendent, and, yet, must always be the guiding light of all philosophical inquiry. The problem for which Plato provides the solution is how to theorize and articulate a truth that resists theorization and articulation. The *Arcades Project*, to which we turn in the next chapter, is Benjamin's attempt to represent transcendent truths. However, as was suggested above, while Plato provides the general strategy, Benjamin diverges from it in his insistence that "textual images," and not narratives are most effective at articulating humanity's relation to the real.

The creation of thought-images, or dialectical-images, then, is Benjamin's solution to the dilemma posed in the introduction to this chapter. Since, according to Benjamin, predicative language cannot articulate truth because it destroys the particularity of its object, the philosopher must proceed in a manner that permits truth to be retained. This is accomplished by engaging in modes of knowing that are allegorical,

---

[381] "*Sokrates: das ist die Gestalt, in der er den alten Mythos annihiliert und rezipiert hat.*"

open and multivalent. This method is the one most appropriate for an ontology of internal relations, where essences are relations, and not atomistic substances. It is Benjamin's *Arcades Project* that represents his ultimate experiment in this mode of writing. This work is Benjamin's attempted rescue of the vanishing truths of modernity's encounter with Capital.

Chapter Four – Provoking Apocatastasis: The *Arcades Project*

The *Arcades Project* is Benjamin's Quixotic experiment in reading and writing history, one in which the themes discussed in the preceding chapters converge and find their expression. Regarded by some as an un-readable text, the *Arcades Project* was in some sense doomed to failure based solely on the logic of Benjamin's own philosophy. It is a text that tries to communicate the incommunicable. It strives to narrate the non-narrative dimensions of history and experience. The tension that marks Benjamin philosophy of "language" is also the central tension in the *Arcades Project*, namely that post-lapsarian "speech" is barred from expressing truth directly, while simultaneously being the only faculty capable of gesturing towards it. The *Arcades Project* is an attempt to circumvent language so as to fulfill it. Perhaps the *Arcades Project* can be regarded as an instance of Hamann's divine translation, in which an attempt is made to smuggle truth out of Eden. If the *Arcades Project* is a grand act of translating the divine, if it is a theology of the social, then following Benjamin's own theory, it must fail at the very moment it succeeds.

Perhaps, this is too simplistic a view. Benjamin conceived the *Arcades Project* as a "Copernican turn," in historiography. The towering mass of fragments that comprise the bulk of the work were meant to undermine the perspectives of domination which Benjamin saw encoded in the logic of hegemonic historical narratives. The *Arcades Project* embodies Benjamin's campaign to rescue the forgotten histories that the hegemonic History of the victor denies. It represents his endeavor to save for

remembrance the suffering of the oppressed by shattering the historical narratives that deny these voices their right to be heard.

I think Beiner is correct when he argues in, "Walter Benjamin's Philosophy of History" that the "Theses on the Concept of History" supplies the *Arcades* with the necessary underlying epistemo-critical theory.[382] "Theses VI" is particularly instructive for what Benjamin has in mind:

> Articulating the past historically does not mean recognizing it "the way it really was." It means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to hold fast that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to the historical subject in a moment of danger. The danger threatens both the content of the tradition and those who inherit it. For both, it is one and the same thing: the danger of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. Every age must strive anew to wrest tradition away from the conformism that is working to overpower it. The Messiah comes not only as the redeemer; he comes as the victor over the Antichrist. The only historian capable of fanning the spark of hope in the past is the one who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he is victorious. And this enemy has never ceased to be victorious. (*SW4*, 391; *GS1*, 695)[383]

---

[382] Ronald Beiner, "Walter Benjamin's Philosophy of History," *Political Theory* 12, no. 3 (Aug. 1984): 430.

[383] "*Vergangenes historisch artikulieren heißt nicht, es erkennen 'wie es denn eigentlich gewesent ist.' Es heißt, sich einer Erinnerung bemächtigen, wie sie im Augenblick einer Gefahr aufblitzt. Dem historischen Materialismus geht es darum, ein Bild der Vergangenheit festzuhalten, wie es sich im Augenblick der Gefahr droht sowohl dem*

Benjamin is the historian who is trying to appropriate memories as they flash up through a new manner of presenting history. His *Arcades Project* is the attempt to fan the sparks of hope against the Marxian class enemy, the capitalist ruling class, whose self-justifying teleological narratives do not shy away from instrumentalizing even the dead. To accomplish his task, Benjamin does not simply attempt to incorporate missing content within the master narratives, but he radically re-conceptualizes the form of historical writing itself.

Despite Benjamin's high hopes, however, the *Arcades Projected* did not manage to be any of the things he had wanted it to be. Perhaps, as Tiedemann suggests, part of the problem is the extremely high demand the text makes on its readers.[384] If Benjamin had wanted to effect a "Copernican turn" in historiography by smashing master narratives into fragments, the result remains inaccessible to precisely those readers who, from the perspective of a Marxian revolutionary politic, should be the beneficiaries of this strategy: the (European) working class. Marx's *Capital* provides an instructive contrast. Marx published the chapters of his analysis of Capital in weekly newspapers, which were

---

Bestand der Tradition wie ihren Empfängern. Für beide ist sie ein und dieselbe: sich zum Werkzeug der herrschenden Klasse herzugeben. In jeder Epoche muß versucht werden, die Überlieferung von neuem dem Konformismus abzugewinnen, der im Begriff steht, sie zu überwältigen. Der Messias kommt ja nicht nur als der Erlöser; er kommt als der Überwinder des Antichrist. Nur dem *Geschichtsschreiber wohnt die Gabe bei, im Vergangenen den Funken der Hoffnung ansumachen, der davon durchdrungen ist: auch die Toten werden vor dem Feind, wenn er siegt, nicht sicher sein. Und dieser Feind hat zu siegen nicht aufgehört.*"

[384] Tiedemann, *Studien zur Philosophie Walter Benjamins*, 147: "*Wenn Das Passagenwerk als literarisches Projekt gescheitert ist, dann nicht zuletzt weil Theorie nicht unmittelbar – anstatt kraft iherer Modellfunktion – Anweisung auf Praxis werden kann.*"

accessible to the working class, in terms of costs and of content. Importantly, Marx's analysis, although dense, stays within the accepted conventions of a work of social analysis and critique. The reader can, if with some effort, comprehend Marx's thoughts on questions of value-production, exploitation, labor organization or health and safety reforms. Benjamin's text, by contrast, requires the reader to learn an entirely new way of reading. A manner of reading, already analyzed in the previous chapters, that takes for granted a thorough understanding of modern and ancient metaphysics, epistemology, revolutionary politics, and aesthetic theory. Even armed with this arcane and specialized knowledge, many readers have run afoul of Benjamin's intentions, as is demonstrated by some contemporary scholarly literature on the text. That is to say, while the *Arcades Project* can be "read," it calls for an approach fundamentally at odds with how most "normal" historical and social science texts are read.

It is here, where the text fails, that it succeeds. Benjamin demands a manner of reading, which simultaneously amounts to a new manner of cultural interpretation. In his "Surrealism" essay, Benjamin asks, "Where are the conditions for revolution? In the changing of attitudes or of external circumstances? This is the cardinal question [...] and cannot be glossed over" (*SW2*, 216; *GS2*, 308.)[385] I suggest the *Arcades Project* answers this question with a definitive emphasis on "changing attitudes." In order to understand the text, Benjamin demands that his readers adopt a perspective fundamentally at odds

---

[385] The complete German passage reads: "*Wo liegen die Voraussetzungen der Revolution? In der Änderung der Gesinnung oder der äußeren Verhältnisse? Das is die Kardinalfrage, die das Verältnis von Politik und Moral bestimmt und keine Vertuschung zuläßt.*"

with the hegemonic master-narrative position(s). Breaking with these views, however, is not easily accomplished. The social continuously re-enforces certain perspectives, while negating others. Marx summarizes the problem, when he writes in the *German Ideology*, that "The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas."[386] Even the exploited classes, therefore, can adopt the perspectives of their rulers without having to confront the contradiction between their perspectives and their objective historical position. Benjamin articulates this worry in the above cited "Theses VI" when he notes that the ever present danger, also in historiography, is "the danger of becoming a tool of the ruling classes" (*SW4*, 391; *GS1*, 695.)[387] Although Marx's arguments in the "Theses on Feuerbach," especially number three, suggest that particular perspectives can be overcome through the help of philosophy, which thereby becomes "revolutionary practice," this project is neither easy nor self-evident.[388] As Hegel once claimed, philosophy is "[...] the way of despair,"[389] and Durkheim noted that the social makes itself felt most when one tries to resist it.[390] Coming to a new philosophical position, as Freud was all too aware, can be a painful and difficult psychological experience, especially if this position breaks with the conventions of normative modes of reading the social.

---

[386] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engles, *The German Ideology* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1998), 67.
[387] "*[...] sich zum Werkzeug der herrschenden Klasse herzugeben.*"
[388] Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," 569-570.
[389] Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 49 (78.)
[390] Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, 63.

The new hermeneutical perspective Benjamin's *Arcades Project* expects the reader to adopt is simultaneously the re-orientation required to deconstruct the mythic dimensions of the social. The heuristic moment of the text is in stimulating the reader to undergo this re-orientation in order to make both "texts" legible, the *Arcades Project* and the social. If the former text becomes legible, it is because the reader has adopted the revolutionary perspective that Benjamin believes necessary to escape from the mythic spell that threatens to ensnare "even the dead," and doom the working class to re-establish the very structures from which it hopes to be liberated.

It is perhaps unfair, then, to criticize Benjamin's text for asking too much of the reader, if this is the nature of contemporary reality. If a truly liberatory revolution needs subjects who see the world the way Benjamin believes they need to see it, and if Benjamin writes a text from this perspective and for this perspective, it is not the text itself that is the problem, but rather the objective historical conditions. The internal logic of the *Arcades* would suggest that if Benjamin's text is difficult to read, it is because the mythic spell that obscures the reality of exploitation in modernity is difficult to counter. Even when it seems as though the other shore has been reached, more often than not, it is not the true nature of reality that is encountered, but another illusion, another version of the mythic. The *Arcades Project* attempts to break the circular movement that threatens to ensnare thought, and this is what makes reading the text such a struggle.

Mythic thought constantly re-captures any attempt to escape its grasp, much like a massive and dense planet's strong gravitational field constantly bends back upon itself those projectiles that attempt to leave its orbit. That is to say, even when thought believes

itself to have escaped the mythic dimension, more often than not it has simply traded one myth for another. Adorno and Horkheimer analyze this structure in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, in which they note that the rational faculty, namely, the very faculty meant to liberate humanity from the mythic, has itself turned into an agent of the irrational. Similarly, this argumentative structure underlies Benjamin's critique of the Surrealists. He claims that the Surrealists believed they had awoken from the dream of myth, but in fact, they only dreamed they were awake. Politically, this same structure is repeated with "Benjamin's enemies," in the "Theses," among them the German Social Democrats (*Sozaildemokratische Partei Deutschland*, or SPD). As Benjamin's invective in "Thesis XI" makes clear, the Social Democrats unintentionally betrayed the working class whom they believed themselves to be representing. For Benjamin, the SPD became a "tool of the ruling classes," because they popularized the views of the ruling class and made these seem like views which could liberate the proletariat. Benjamin explains:

> The conformism which has marked the Social Democrats from the beginning attaches not only to their political tactics but to their economic views as well. It is one reason for the eventual breakdown of their party. Nothing has so corrupted the German working class as the notion that it was moving with the current. It regarded technological development as the driving force of the stream with which it thought it was moving. From there it was but a step to the illusion that the factory work ostensibly furthering technological progress constituted a political achievement. The old Protestant work ethic was resurrected among German workers in secularized form. The Gotha Program already bears traces of this confusion,

defining labor as 'the source of all wealth and all culture.' Smelling a rat, Marx countered that 'the man who possesses no other property than his labor power' must of necessity become 'the slave of other men who have made themselves owners.' Yet the confusion spread, and soon thereafter Joseph Dietzgen proclaimed: 'The savior of modern times is called work. The ... perfecting ... of the labor process constitutes the wealth which can now do what no redeemer has even been able to accomplish.' This vulgar-Marxist conception of the nature of labor scarcely considers the question of how its products could ever benefit the workers when they are beyond the means of those workers. It recognizes only the progress in mastering nature, not the retrogression of society; it already displays the technocratic features that later emerge in fascism. (*SW4*, 393-94; *GS1*, 698-99)[391]

---

[391] "*Der Konformismus, der von Anfang an in der Sozialdemokratie heimisch gewesen ist, haftet nicht nur an ihrer politischen Taktik, sondern auch an ihren ökonomischen Vorstellungen. Er ist eine Ursache des späteren Zusammenbruchs. Es gibt nichts, was die deutsche Arbeiterschaft in dem Grade korrumpiert hat wie die Meinung* sie *schwimme mit dem Strom. Die technische Entwicklung galt ihr als das Gefälle des Stromes, mit dem sie zu schwimmen meinte. Von da war es nur ein Schritt zu der Illusion, die Fabrikarbeit, die im Zuge des technischen Fortschritts gelegen sei, stelle eine politische Leistung dar. Die alte protestantische Werkmoral feierte in säkularisierter Gestalt bei den deutschen Arbeitern ihre Auferstehung. Das Gothaer Pgrogramm trägt bereits Spuren dieser Verwirrung an sich. Es definiert die Arbeit as 'die Quelle alles Reichtums und aller Kultur.' Böses ahnend, entegnete Marx darauf, daß der Mensch, der kein anderes Eigentum besitze als seine Arbeitskraft, 'der Sklave der andern Menschen sein muß, die sich zu Eigentümern ... gemacht haben.' Unbeschadet dessen greift die Konfusion weiter um sich, und bald darauf verkündet Josef Dietzgen: 'Arbeit heißt der Heiland der neueren Zeit ... In der ... Verbesserung ... der Arbeit ... besteht der Reichtum, der jetzt vollbringen kann, was bisher kein Erlöser vollbracht hat.' Dieser vulgärmarxistische Begriff von dem, was die Arbeit ist, hält sich bei der Frage nicht lange auf, wie ihr Produkt den Arbeitern selber anschlägt, solange sie nicht darüber verfügen können. Er will nur die Fortschritte der Naturbeherrschung, nicht die Rückschritte der Gesellschaft wahr haben. Er weist schon die technokratischen Züge auf, die später im Faschismus*

Whereas the Social Democratic party was meant to be a party for the working class with the aims of liberating it from drudgery and oppression, it succumbed instead to the myth of progress which resulted in condemning the working class to the very bondage from which it sought to escape. This structure is for Benjamin the central problematic of a capitalist modernity. To use the language of dreams again, how does one know if one has truly woken up, that is escaped the mythic dimensions of thought, or if, like the Surrealists, one is not simply dreaming that one is awake? What if the contemporary myth is precisely that there is no more myth? This is the presence of myth at the moment of its ostensible absence. To put the same point differently, the appearance of absence is the index of its presence. How is one to distinguish the myth of no myth, which is the presence of myth, from no myth, which is its actual absence? The dream, of course, is almost never registered as a dream by the dreamer. Only one who is awake knows the difference. Yet, waking up is already the end point the text strives to achieve. The question of the text is how to awaken a dreamer from within the dream. As Benjamin puts it, "What follows will be an experiment in the techniques of awakening. An attempt to become aware of the dialectical – the Copernican-turn of remembrance" [K1,1.][392]

For Benjamin, the inability to escape the confines of mythic thought underwrites the failures of the Social Democratic party, of any actually existing socialism, as well as most other attempts to extricate the working class from bondage. That the Russian

---

begegnen werden. Zu diesen gehört ein Begriff der Natur, der sich auf unheilverkündende Art von dem in den sozialistischen Utopien des Vormärz abhebt."

[392] "*Was hier im folgenden gegeben wird, ist ein Versuch zur Technik des Erwachens. Ein Versuch, der dialektischen, der kopernikanischen Wendung des Eingedenkens inne zu werden.*"

Revolution of 1918 should eventually lead to Stalinism can thus be read as its very *telos*, and need not be regarded as an aberration from its intended course, caused by Stalin's superior and cynical political out maneuvering of Trotsky. The Russian Revolution did not emancipate the Russian peasants and workers, but re-instituted a totalitarian regime that incarnated the worst aspects of Czarism. The same could be said for every supposedly liberatory revolution that preceded and followed the Russian one. From the French Revolution which escalated into the Terror and finally the despotism of Napoleon, to the Maoist Red Army brigades of the 1960s, revolutions intended to liberate often ended by subjugating the very people in whose name the revolution was first carried out. That the SPD foreshadowed aspects of the fascism that would soon darken Germany demonstrates for Benjamin that mythic thought was not actually overcome, that the party of the working class did not really wake up from the dream. I believe that had Benjamin not taken his own life on the French-Spanish border in 1940, but had lived to see the establishment of the German Democratic Republic, he would have noticed, as many have since, the correspondences between that "socialist" state and the fascist one that preceded it.

The power of the mythic, the dream, is that it employs precisely the very means that could lead out of the labyrinth of illusion. In this context, historical narratives can be read as being in the service of myth. The problem, for Benjamin, is that historians have primarily fought their ideological battles along the axis of content. One narrative is proffered as more "accurate" than another, as actually conveying "the way it really was." Politically conservative forces might for example, develop historical narratives that focus

on the aristocrats, on the rulers and other cultural elites as the "movers of history," while politically progressive voices may counter with narratives of "the people," who did the bidding of these rulers and, therefore, by extension did the actual labour necessary for the unfolding of historical events. The latter form of writing is the logic that underlies subaltern histories, and postcolonial theory in general.

The paradigmatic example of this "idealist" versus "materialist" debate is, of course, demonstrated by Hegel and Marx's respective approaches to the world historical subject. Whereas Hegel believed he was witnessing the world historical spirit incarnate, as he was fleeing his Jena home in advance of the French troops, Marx would have turned Hegel's analysis around and focused instead on the troops, or the social relations that gave rise to troops, imperial wars, and nation states, as the real force of history. If Benjamin is correct, however, then the strategy of left-leaning historians and theorists, from Marx to Gramsci to Spivak, to counter the narratives of domination by providing a different subject of history, the working class for example, or the "subaltern," the post-colonial subject, is beset by problems, since, for Benjamin, it is not only the content of the narrative that is mythic, but narration itself. The issue for Benjamin is not whether this or that historical narrative is more accurate than another, but the fundamental move in master narratives per se. By weaving together moments of possibility and attributing a certain *telos* to the unfolding of events, master-narratives position the reader as the necessary and expected end point. Hegel, and more recently Francis Fukuyama, for example, believed they had arrived at the end of history.

An analogy may be drawn between Benjamin's critique of historical narratives and that which found expression in modernist aesthetics. The radical break that defines painterly modernism, from Picasso's cubism to Rothko's or Pollock's abstract expressionism, is the supposition that figurative painting encoding definite perspectives, is illusory and "mythic," to re-appropriate Benjamin's concept. The issue is not whether it is more "radical," more "authentic," or more "realistic," to paint a worker as opposed to a prince, but rather that the very perspective built into classical European painting is itself the problem. This perspective is epitomized by the Italian High Renaissance and, as if to underscore Benjamin's point, perpetuated even in the socialist realism of the Soviet Union. Painting in the new style, one that does not encode the perspective of the King, which is generally the position one is forced to take in classical, representative, figurative painting, meant breaking not just from the content but also from the form of tradition. This is the same move Benjamin attempts with respect to writing history in the *Arcades Project.*

The association with modernist aesthetics is not accidental. His critiques notwithstanding, Benjamin drew a great deal of inspiration from Andre Breton, "Louis Aragon, Philippe Soupault, Robert Desnos, Paul Eluard" (*SW2*, 207; *GS2*, 295) as well as Max Ernst and others. Benjamin met Aragon in 1930, witnessing first hand the fallout for the movement after the publication of Breton's *The Surrealist Manifesto* (*SW2*, 836.) The montage approach to writing, which is the method Benjamin employs in some of his most important texts, such as *One-Way Street,* the "Theses," "Central Park," and the *Arcades Project* is inspired by works such as Breton's *Nadija.* Breton and his fellow Surrealists

approached writing the way modernists painters approached graphic art. For them the narrative itself is implicated in the mythic dimension of thought and, therefore, needs to be radically altered. The problem, is that breaking with the narrative, i.e., the logical progression of ideas, is both jarring and confusing. Reading a collage as opposed to a narrative requires a fundamentally different engagement with the text akin to the different position the spectator is thrust into when standing in front of a Rothko painting, or when listening to a-tonal music. This is no longer the aesthetics of totalities, which, at the level of the historical means no longer succumbing to meta-narratives, irrespective of whether these are products of the political left or right. This, at least, is the underlying move that defines the architectonics of the *Arcades Project*.

Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, then, is an attempt to "brush history against the grain." He is trying to break with the very form of historical transmission, so that a new, revolutionary and liberatory spirit can come to the fore. As Beiner explains:

> historical materialism does not assume a reverential attitude to history, contemplating the flow of historical occurrences with the complacent assurance of continual progress. The latter approach to history is what Benjamin refers to as historicism, the political counter-part to which is the German Social Democratic Party [....][393]

Whether the *Arcades* actually succeeds in transmitting the spirit of a history left un-narrated, whether it manages to rescue modernity's forgotten fragments and to redeem them, whether it saves the dead from the "enemy," and whether it effects the radical

---

[393] Beiner, "Walter Benjamin's Philosophy of History," 426.

reorientation necessary for realizing truly liberatory potentials, must be determined from "within" the text itself. I believe it is an ungenerous reading to assume the text is a failure because it asks a lot of its readers. Rather, the text needs to be critiqued "internally," within the logic it sets forth and operates within. In what follows, I will trace the outlines of the history of a text that was never actually written, and then proceed to analyze the fragments which comprise the *Arcades Project* in terms of Benjamin's theory of the dialectical-image. The last section of this chapter will be devoted to pursuing some of the Benjaminian archetypes that relate to philosophical perspectives on the social, such as the rag picker, the flaneur, and the Parisian arcades themselves.

I: The *Arcades Project*: The History of a Text not Written

Benjamin worked sporadically for the last thirteen years of his life, between 1927 and 1940, on the manuscript that was to become in the hands of Gretel and Theodor Adorno, as well as Adorno's student Tiedemann, the *Arcades Project*.[394] Originally intended as a collaborative effort with Franz Hessel on a newspaper article about the Parisian arcades, the project quickly grew to become Benjamin's most pressing intellectual task.[395] For all the significance attributed to this work, a text by Benjamin known as the *Arcades Project* does not really exist.[396] What Benjamin entrusted to

---

[394] Rolf Tiedemann, "Dialectics at a Standtill," in *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 929.
[395] Tiedemann, "Dialectics at a Standtill," 930.
[396] Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1991), ix.

Bataille in 1940, before fleeing from the advancing *Wehrmacht*, consisted of bound bundles of loosely organized newspaper clippings, pictures, quotes and notes.[397] Each bundle, or convolute as Adorno would later refer to them, and according to which the published text has been organized, corresponds thematically to a particular aspect of nineteenth century Parisian culture which Benjamin deemed worthy of further research. Topics such as 'Iron Construction', and 'Fashion', the psycho-physiognomy of character types like the 'Collector' and the 'Flaneur', and notable personages, including 'Baudelaire', 'Fourier', and 'Marx' all betrayed telling features of modernity's true nature. They were allocated their own convolutes under which were included any assortment of fragmentary material, mostly newspaper clippings, which were, often only tenuously related to the general heading. Benjamin eventually amassed thousands of entries which now comprise the content of *Arcades Project.* If new subject matters became pressing, Benjamin would simply begin another convolute to incorporate them.

However, the convolutes Benjamin had entrusted to Bataille were incomplete and disorganized.[398] Wohlfarth notes that in light of this, it is curious that Tiedemann chose to title the text *Passagenwerk*, "and not, as Benjamin himself called it, the *Passagenarbeit* or *Passagenprojekt.*"[399] What Benjamin left behind after his suicide at Portbou was the unfinished torso of his life's work. Had Benjamin had the opportunity to complete his opus, it might well have become, as Tiedemann suggests "a materialist philosophy of the

---

[397] Wolin, "Walter Benjamin's Failed Messianism: One-Way Street," 33.
[398] Tiedemann, "Dialectics at a Standtill," 953.
[399] Wohlfarth, "Re-Fusing Theology. Some First Responses to Walter Benjamin's Arcades Project," 5. Wolin, "Walter Benjamin's Failed Messianism: One-Way Street," 37.

history of the nineteenth century,"[400] or the Copernican revolution in the writing of history. Perhaps, the "oppressive" amount of quotations, about which Tiedemann and Wolin among many other readers have complained, would have been mediated by more of Benjamin's own theory.[401] Benjamin, however, did not have time finish his project.

The fact that the *Arcades Project* exists as a published book today, even if as a work *non finito*, is in part due to the meticulous work of Theodor and Gretel Adorno, who first laboured over the manuscript after its re-discovery in the bowels of the Bibliothéque Nationale in Paris, where Bataille had hidden them.[402] Indeed, the original manuscript, housed at the Walter Benjamin archive in Berlin, still bear Gretel Adorno's first editorial marks. Primarily, however, the *Arcades Project* achieved its published form due to Tiedemann's Herculean (or perhaps Sisyphean) labour, devoting himself to the painstaking philological effort of deciphering Benjamin's legendarily difficult hand-writing and compiling and organizing the scattered notes for publication.[403]

While it is true of most texts that they are not the work of the author alone, the *Arcades Project* deserves special consideration. Between the time it left Benjamin's hands in 1940 and its first publication in 1982, the *Arcades Project* became something of a collaborative effort. In fact, some scholars have voiced unease about the "editorial monopoly" that The Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt (*Institut für*

---

[400] Tidemann, "Dialectics at a Standtill," 948.
[401] Ibid., 931.
[402] Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 57.
[403] Wohlfarth, "Re-fusing Theology. Some First Reponsonses to Walter Benjamin's Arcades Project," 4.

Sozialforschung) is supposed to have exerted.[404] Without the Institute, however, there would not be an *Arcades Project* today, either in published form or otherwise, as both Adorno and Horkheimer were instrumental in shaping not only the explicitly Marxian trajectory of the work, but also in procuring the grants which supported Benjamin during the critical phases of the project in the 1930s. That is to say that in the final analysis it is worth remembering that the *Arcades* in its published form bears the traces of minds other than Benjamin's.

Since the *Arcades Project* was not completed by Benjamin, the reader is faced with fundamental interpretive questions. How should a text be read that was intended to be a revolutionary experiment in the writing of history, but which the author did not get close to finishing? And more importantly, can the ideas Benjamin wanted to transmit be grasped in the form the text took after his death? Luckily, Benjamin left a number of significant clues that allow the contemporary exegete to divine his intentions. First, the 1935 and 1939 "Exposés," also published as separate essays under the title, "Paris, (the)[405] Capital of the Nineteenth Century" summarizes Benjamin's plan for the *Arcades Project* and provides the reader with a close approximation of the interpretative frame. In addition to his other major works, the "Theses" among them, are also the "First Sketches" a conglomerate of working notes included in the English edition. These contain a trove of Benjamin's observations and annotations, invaluable for deciphering

---

[404] Ibid.

[405] The article in the titles distinguishes the two essays in terms of the publication date. In the English editions therefore, "Paris, *the* Capital of the Nineteenth Century" (1935), and "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century" (1939).

the text, and reveal the context for many of Benjamin's ideas, not given in the *Arcades* text proper. Clues about how to read the text also exist in the convolutes themselves. "Convolute K," and especially "Convolute N" which are dedicated to the method and theory of the *Arcades* are invaluable for affording insight into Benjamin's aims. Lastly, there are his correspondences with his friends and colleagues, which document Benjamin's developing conceptions for his work. However, these primary and to some extent secondary sources do not paint an unambiguous portrait of Benjamin's intentions. Alas, a great many of the references are contradictory or even incoherent.[406]

The *Arcades Project*, is Benjamin's most daring undertaking and, at the same time, is his most spectacular failure. This text in particular, demonstrates why Benjamin has been received with such ambivalence by the scholarly community, especially by those outside of literary and aesthetic theory. Fragmentary, often arcane and in parts frustratingly ambiguous, the *Arcades* is open to being read as either Benjamin's *tour de force* or as an experiment in theory gone awry. The *Arcades Project* was not completed and one may wonder whether it ever could have been. Yet, notwithstanding these caveats, the existence of multiple editors, despite any "editorial monopoly" exercised by the Frankfurt School, and despite the fact that its style is devilishly difficult to penetrate, I believe that this work remains the most important text for understanding Benjamin's cultural theory. With the possible exception of the "Theses on the Concept of History," and his equally aphoristic *One-Way Street*, no other work by Benjamin so thoroughly

---

[406] Tidemann, "Dialectics at a Standtill," 929.

combines both theory and method.[407] The *Arcades* is a highly self-reflexive and self-referential work. It is an attempt to theorize a new approach to cultural and historical analysis and, at the same time, it is an exemplar and product of these approaches.

The *Arcades Project* begins *in medias res*. It consists of thirty-six convolutes of varying lengths. Each convolute is a pastiche of primary source material – culled mostly from the Bibliothéque Nationale – haphazardly assembled and only occasionally interspersed with Benjamin's theoretical musings. The reader will search in vain for a narrative thread that connects either the material within each convolute, or the various convolutes to each other. Although the content of each convolute is ostensibly related to a general theme, this relationship is often only tenuous, giving the text a certain aura of arbitrariness. As has been suggested above, this is not to say that there is no conceptual structure that lends itself to a coherent interpretation.[408] Once the reader has discerned Benjamin's overall theory, each aphorism, quote, picture and note can be deciphered as a self-contained and complete monad of meaning. These monads or, as Benjamin termed them, dialectical-images, are the elementary units of Benjamin's method of presentation and stimulus for a historical awakening.

It is in the sense of a political awakening to the true, that is, as I have argued, a Marxian interpretation of social and economic reality, that the reader is drawn into Benjamin's experiment of writing history as a participant and which lends the *Arcades*

---

[407] Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 64.
[408] Ibid., 54. Also see also Benjamin, *Correspondences*, 490.

Project its pedagogic character.[409] Benjamin casts the reader in the role of the flaneur who ambles through the textual *Arcades* as if through the Parisian arcades of the nineteenth century. The content of the arcades that the flaneur encounters on his stroll under the glass roofed passages – the innumerable consumer goods, the "wonders" that industrialization has made possible – correspond to the dialectical-images in the *Arcades Project's* convolutes. The dialectical-images, the monads, the ideas, have, so Benjamin, the potential to shock the reader out of the mythic spell cast by the appearances of Capital. For this to occur, the reader must adopt the perspective in which the truth of the now becomes illuminated. In order to grasp Benjamin's theory of the role of the dialectical-image in provoking an awakening to the exploitation of Capital, we turn to a discussion of the interpretive units that compose the *Arcades Project.*

II: Monads as Ideas as Dialectical-Images

The elemental philosophical unit of the *Arcades Project* is the dialectical-image, or, what Benjamin alternatively refers to as the thought-image. The dialectical-image, as it appears in this work, shows marks of the Leibnizan monad, the baroque emblem, the Platonic and Neoplatonic idea, the Romantic, the avant-garde and the Kabalistic fragment. In one sense, each of these philosophical, religious and artistic traditions converges in Benjamin's notion of the dialectical-image. Benjamin described his method in "Convolute N,":

---

[409] Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 292.

> Method of this project: literary montage. I needn't *say* anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse – these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them. [N1a,8][410]

In "Karl Kraus," Benjamin describes Kraus' method of citation that I believe equally well applies to himself. He writes, "In the quotation that both saves and punishes, language proves the matrix of justice. It summons the word by its name" (*SW2*, 454; *GS2*, 363).[411] Benjamin continues:

> In citation the two realms – of origin and destruction – justify themselves before language. And conversely, only where they interpenetrate – in citation – is language consummated. In it is mirrored the angelic tongue in which all words, startled from the idyllic context of meaning, have become mottoes in the book of Creation." (*SW2*, 454; *GS2*, 363)[412]

Wolin comments here that, "When the method was successful – as, for example, in his great surrealist-inspired collection of aphorisms, *One-Way-Street* – the results were extraordinary. But when his anti-discursive bent was carried to an extreme, the dismal

---

[410] "*Methode dieser Arbeit: literarische Montage. Ich habe nichts zu sagen. Nur zeigen. Ich werde nichts Wertvolles entwenden und mir keine geistvollen Formulierungen aneignen. Aber die Lumpen, den Abfall: die will ich nicht inventarisieren sondern sie auf die einzig mögliche Weise zu ihrem Rechte kommen lassen: sie verwenden.*"

[411] "*Im rettenden und strafenden Zitat erweist die Sprache sich als die Mater der Gerechtigkeit. Es ruft das Wort beim Namen auf, bricht es zerstörend aus dem Zusammenhang, eben damit aber ruft es dasselbe auch zurück an seinen Ursprung.*"

[412] "*Vor der Sprache weisen sich beide Reiche – Ursprung so wie Zerstörung – im Zitat – ist sie vollendet. Es spiegelt sich in ihm die Engelsprache, in welcher alle Worte, aus dem idyllischen Zusammenhang des Sinnes aufgestört, zu Motti in dem Buch der Schöpfung geworden sind.*"

result could prove infuriating."[413] The infuriating Benjamin, is for Wolin, the Benjamin of the *Arcades*. Wolin's assessment of the *Arcades* is ultimately an assessment of its fundamental philosophical unit, the dialectical-image. However, since the *Arcades Project* requires a fundamentally different exegesis than most works less fragmentary and disjointed in nature, and since this work, in particular, places significant emphasis on the reader's ability to theorize in the manner that Benjamin himself does, it is necessary to investigate the status of the dialectical-image as a method for constructing historical texts.

In "Theses XVII," Benjamin writes that:

> The historical materialist approaches a historical object only where it confronts him as a monad. In this structure he recognizes the sign of a messianic arrest of happening, or (to put it differently) a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past. He takes cognizance of it in order to blast a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history; thus, he blasts a specific life out of the era, a specific work out of the lifework. (*SW4*, 396; *GS1*, 703)[414]

Contrary to how history tends to be conceived, Benjamin suggests the flow of time confronts the historian as a totality, the monad, and that its apprehension consists in

---

[413] Wolin, "Walter Benjamin's Failed Messianism: One-Way Street," 34.

[414] *Der historische Materialist geht an einen geschichtlichen Gegenstand einzig und allein da heran, wo er ihm als Monade entgegentritt. In dieser Struktur erkennt er das Zeichen einer messianischen Stillstellung des Geschehens, anders gesagt, einer revolutionären Chance im Kampfe für die unterdrückte Vergangenheit. Er nimmt sie wahr, um eine bestimmte Epoche aus dem homogenen Verlauf der Geschichte herauszusprengen; so sprengt er ein bestimmtes Leben aus der Epoche, so ein bestimmtes Werk aus dem Lebenswerk.*"

arresting the movement of history, not in attempting to articulate its flow or in justifying its trajectory.

A return to Leibniz, as Benjamin himself suggests in the "Theses" just quoted, furnishes the philosophical justification for Benjamin's strange formulation. In his *Discourse on Metaphysics*, Leibniz defines individual substances, the monad, as that which contains all predicates within itself, writing:

> Now it is evident that all true predication has some basis in the nature of things and that, when a proposition is not an identity, that is, when the predicate is not explicitly contained in the subject, it must be contained in it virtually. That is what the philosophers call *in-esse*, when they say that the predicate is in the subject. Thus the subject term must always contain the predicate term, so that one who understands perfectly the notion of the subject would also know that the predicate belongs to it.[415]

Leibniz continues:

> Since this is so, we can say that the nature of an individual substance or of a complete being is to have a notion so complete that it is sufficient to contain and to allow us to deduce from it all the predicates of the subject to which this notion is attributed.[416]

The predicates of objects also include their temporal dimension. Imagined from God's-eye-view, all possible pasts and futures are inscribed on the object and are at least

---

[415] G. W. Leibniz, *Discourse on Metaphysics*, trans. Daniel Graber and Roger Ariew (Cambridge, Mass.: Hackett Publishing, 1991), 8.
[416] Ibid.

virtually detectable. Leibniz continues:

> Thus when we consider carefully the connection of things, we can say that from all time in Alexander's soul there are vestiges of everything that has happened to him and marks of everything that will happen to him and even traces of everything that happens in the universe, even though God alone could recognize them all.[417]

Leibniz's description re-imagines the temporal in essentially spatial terms. Temporality is effectively negated in "God's perspective." Past and future are eternally present in the object and mark it. For Leibniz, as for Kant, a notion of time is, epistemologically speaking, necessary for mortal creatures so that perceptions can be organized, even though, ontologically speaking there is something fundamentally un-real about this. While the historical object contains all its predication within itself, the human mind requires history for this to become apparent.

> [...] God, seeing Alexander's individual notion or haeccity, sees in it at the same time the basis and reason for all the predicates which can be said truly of him, for example that he vanquished Darius and Porus; he even knows *a priori* (and not by experience) whether he died a natural death or whether he was poisoned, *something we can know only through history.*[418]

---

[417] Ibid.
[418] Ibid.

Whereas for Leibniz the marks of the historical object are only fully readable by God and only virtually accessible to the historian, for Benjamin, the future and past temporalities seem to be buried in the details of the historical object. As with Benjamin's insistence on a relational ontology in contrast to the atomism of liberalism and positivism, the truth of history is one produced relationally. History is the present in relation to a past, in which that past becomes visible for what it was.

Benjamin writes:

> History deals with connections and with arbitrarily elaborated causal chains. But since history affords an idea of the fundamental citability of its object, this object must present itself, in its ultimate form, as a moment of humanity. In this moment, time must be brought to a standstill. (*SW4*, 403; *GS1*, 1233)[419]

And later,

> (If one looks upon history as a text, then one can say of it what a recent author has said of literary texts – namely, that the past has left in them images comparable to those registered by a light-sensitive plate. 'The future alone possesses developers strong enough to reveal the image in all its details [....] The historical method is a philological method based on the book of life. 'Read what was never written,' runs

---

[419] "*Die Geschichte hat es mit Zusammenhängen zu tun und mit beliebig ausgesponnenen Kausalketten. Indem sie aber von der grundsätzlichen Zitierbarkeit ihres Gegenstandes einen Begriff gibt, muß derselbe in seiner höchsten Fassung sich als ein Augenblick der Menschheit darbieten. Die Zeit muß in ihm stillgestellt sein.*"

> a line in Hofmannsthal. The reader one should think of here is the true historian.) (*SW4*, 405; *GS1*, 1238)[420]

Benjamin suggests the image of unfolding a fan as one that is also descriptive of the potential for mining the endless content of dialectical, that is, historical images. In *One-Way Street*, Benjamin explains:

> [...] the faculty of imagination is the gift of interpolating into the infinitely small, of inventing, for every intensity, an extensiveness to contain its new, compressed fullness – in short, of receiving each image as if it were that of the folded fan, which only in spreading draws breadth and flourishes, in its new expanse, the beloved features within it. (*SW1*, 466; *GS4*, 117)[421]

It is in the detail, therefore, that the virtual dimensions of the historical object become potentially legible. In contrast to normative notions of historiography, Benjamin regards the past and the future to be present within the object of history when viewed monadologically. Recognizing the historical object as a monad is to relate to the image of

---

[420] "*Will man die Geschichte als einen Text betrachten, dann gilt von ihr, was ein neuerer Autor von literarischen sagt: die Vergangenheit habe in ihnen Bilder niedergelegt, die man denen vergleichen könne, die von einer lichtempfindlichen Platte festgehalten werden. 'Nur die Zukunft hat Entwickler zur Verfügung, die stark genug sind, um das Bild mit allen Details zum Vorschein kommen zu lassen. [...] Die historische Methode ist eine philologische, der das Buch des Lebens zugrunde liegt. 'Was nie geschrieben wurde, lesen' heißt es bei Hofmansthal. Der Leser, an den hier zu denken ist, ist der wahre Historiker.*"

[421] "*[...] das Vermögen der Phantasie ist die Gabe, im unendlich Kleinen zu interpolieren, jeder Intensität als Extensivem ihre neue gedrängte Fülle zu erfinden, kurz, jedes Bild zu nehmen, als sei es das des zusammengelegten Fächers, das erst in der Entfaltung Atem holt und mit der neuen Breite die Züge des geliebten Menschen in seinem Innern aufführt.*"

the past relationally, in which the present and the past illuminate a truth: this is the "messianic arrest of happening," (*messianischen Stilltsellung*). It "blast a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history" (*SW4*, 396; *GS1*, 703).[422]

Contrary to Weber's assertions, for Benjamin, "homogenous empty time," a discussion of which he first broaches in the *Tragic Drama*, is the mythic time. Weber had argued that the consequence of the Protestant Reformation was to de-mystify the European social, including notions of temporality. Whereas Weber saw this change in the understanding of time as a sign of secularization, of de-spiritualization, Benjamin characteristically sees the opposite, namely, the persistence of a world view that shares conceptual affinities with Greek and Roman pagan imaginaries. Homogenous empty time shares some conceptual affinities with H.A.L Fischer's characterization, often attributed to Arnold J. Toynbee that "history is just one damn thing after another." It is the beat by which events are stamped out. It can also include a notion of the teleological, in that what comes after is explained by demonstrating necessary relationships with its causes. In this sense, Schöttker notes that Benjamin's notion of homogenous empty time is also related to his critique of progress, in which the supposition of a natural *telos* in liberal ideology, by which the social world constantly improves as if by natural laws, leads to a disinterest in the now.[423]

In contrast, Benjamin's notion of now-time (*Jetztzeit*) in which all time is at least virtually recognizable in the "now" of the monad, breaks with the notion of time as a

---

[422] "*[...] eine bestimmte Epoche aus dem homogenen Verlauf der Geschichte herauszusprengen [....]*"
[423] Schöttker, "Erinnern," 293.

current simply marking the passage of events. Recourse to the operations of a religious calendar is useful here to elucidate the relational moment in Benjamin's theory of history. As Taylor helpfully notes, holy days, let us use those of the Jewish calendar, are in some sense temporally "closer" to the historical event than the profane day that preceded it, even though the holy day (holiday) falls chronologically speaking "later" in the year. Thus, Passover brings a faithful Jewish community closer to ancient Egypt. Through remembrance, through ritual, through prayer, those celebrating the Passover bring distant events back into a present that in some sense negates the linear logic of mechanical time or homogeneous empty time as that which simply marks the passing of events.

The past also illuminates something about the present. A given Passover might have certain significance due to the current historical situation that it did not (seem to) posses previously. Passover celebrated in Berlin in the year following *Kristallnacht*, for example, might call forth a reading of the holy day that would not have been apparent earlier. This again changes the past itself. Present circumstances also refract the present back upon the original Passover. There is something to be discovered in the meaning of Passover, in the "original" historical event, as a result of the present circumstances that were not readily discernable at other historical junctures. When Hamann argues, for example, that his relationship to his contemporary philosophers is similar to that of Socrates to the Sophists, the image not only tells us something about Hamann's present, it simultaneously reveals something about Socrates' situation. The truth of history, for Benjamin, is constructed relationally, through the image, in which the image as monad

brings forth a constellation of details that provide insight into reality. In this respect, Adorno's claim that "[...] truth is a constellation of ideas that together constitute the divine name and these crystallize within the detail, their force field"[424] can be read as establishing the underlying logic that informs the *Arcades Project* and Benjamin's preoccupation with the minutiae of modernity more generally.

Reading history monadologically, then, seems to allow for a "messianic arrest," in the sense that in the object, time can be glimpsed as present, and the detail as that special dimension in which the virtual futures and pasts of the object are secretly inscribed. "Exploding" the historical event out of empty time is the moment of recognition when it is seen as a constellation, referencing something that occurred perhaps eons ago, or something that is yet to happen, but which is legible in the present by the keen (that is, the historical materialist) observer.

It is here that we attain a better grasp of the revelatory power of memory discussed in Chapter Two. We recall that according to Bergson, memory is the faculty that provides the "spirit" of a perceptual event; it changes a fleeting perceptual moment into a lived experience that has duration. It was also discussed that for Benjamin, one of the important insights provided by Bergson's theory was the distinction between contemplative and motoric memory. In relation to reading the real, Benjamin would counsel that the details contained in the idea, (or, the monad, or, the thought-image) need to be encountered with contemplative memory. As Schöttker notes, Benjamin equates remembrance with awakening. By connecting memory and awakening, Benjamin

---

[424] Adorno, "Introduction to Benjamin's Schriften," 6.

changes the terms of the analysis from one limited to the past, to an event in the present. Memory of what has been, allows the reader of the social to see what is. Memory becomes the cornerstone of a new dialectic of history.[425] It is in the detail that the truth of modernity is hidden, and it requires a particular gaze to illuminate it. "The dialectical image can," writes Benjamin, "be defined as the involuntary memory of a redeemed humanity" (*SW4*, 403; *GS1*, 1233).[426]

III - Traces of Myth and the (Dis)appearance of Truth

The fragments that comprise the *Arcades Project* are monads which present the reader with opportunities to gain insight into the true nature of the real. I am indebted to Wiesenthal for her insight that the dialectical-image is Benjamin's formulation for what in earlier works he termed the extreme.[427] The extreme, of course, is the idea in ontology, the act of rescue in "epistemology," the artwork in aesthetic theory, and the perceptual content of actual lived experience. The relation to epistemology and theology is also noted by Rochlitz, who suggests that the fragment is the "repetition of origin in language, an exercise in naming."[428] The fragments are offered to the reader as one part of a dialectic in which a moment of truth could potentially be generated inter-textually, i.e., typologically, predicated on a critical, even a subversive reading. This structure is

---

[425] Schöttker, "Erinnern," 279.
[426] "*Das dialektische Bild ist zu definieren als die unwillkürliche Erinnerung der erlösten Menschheit.*"
[427] Wiesenthal, *Zur Wissenschaftstheorie Walter Benjamins*, 70.
[428] Rochlitz, *The Disenchantment of Art*, 38.

essentially that of Benjamin's Schlegel-inspired aesthetic theory, in which the textual monad, the thought-*image*, occupies the same position as a work of art in that it attains completion by being read. The truth generated by the dialectic of historical materialist cultural critic and textual monad of nineteenth century Parisian culture, represents a possible moment of recognition, which is synonymous with its rescue, and the messianic arrest of happening.

But how, exactly is a truth about capitalist modernity to be recognized, rescued, and arrested in a newspaper fragment from the Bibliotheque Nationale? How are these supposed "monads" to propel the historian, the reader of the *Arcades*, the reader of the social toward any sort of recognition, especially toward a recognition that entails a certain revolutionary momentum? And what exactly is the truth that the *Arcades Project* tries to help the reader realize? To delve into these questions more deeply, it will prove useful to introduce Benjamin's notion of the trace, especially with respect to myth. Since the mythic in Capital is especially readable in the fetish, we will turn first to that concept.

Benjamin's social analysis is in some respects an attempt to grasp what it means for the concept of experience when the appearance of Capital, free market exchange and the accumulation of consumer goods devoid of any obvious signs of oppression, conflict with the essence of Capital, the exploitation of workers, given that these irreconcilable dimensions are created and experienced by the same subject, the worker or more generally, the working class. Marx noted that while consumption happens in the bright light of exchange, value-creation takes place behind the backs of workers. That is to say, that there is an oppressive dimension to Capital that is not readily discernable in the

phenomenal appearance of Capital's primary incarnation, the commodity. The language of essence and appearance is instructive here. The mythic dimension of Capital is its appearance. Its essence is the (under-)side of production. According to Marx, what defines Capital as Capital, and not some other type of economic organization is not the mere existence of markets and exchange, which have been present in various forms throughout much of recorded human history, but the mode of *production* peculiar to it. That is, the essence of Capital is value-creation, much of which in the 19th century was predicated on factory work. Moving from the realm of commodity display and consumption, to the realm of production means, for Benjamin, penetrating the mythic and discovering a theological reality: hell. Only when the reality of the situation is comprehended, namely, that modernity is not the mythic paradise suggested by advertisement, the prevalence of consumer goods, and the promises of more leisure time, but an actual hell, can a turn out of this state even be contemplated. If the theological reality of modernity is not brought into the foreground in analysis, if European Capital is not recognized as hellish, then any attempt to better the lot of the working class is, *a priori*, doomed to failure. This point is one that Marx failed to incorporate fully into his political projections. Benjamin and the members of the Frankfurt School were keenly aware that "worker revolutions" often meant nothing more than a change in authoritarian leadership, and not egalitarian changes to the relations of production. Being caught by the mythic spell of commodity fetishism seems a sign for Benjamin that the other side, the deleterious consequences of capitalist production and the hell this produces, remains hidden.

This is not to maintain that the fetish dimension was not fully recognized by Marx, who analyzed this point in his first chapter of *Capital*, a passage which Benjamin cites in full in the *Arcades Project*:

> A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing and easily understood. Its analysis shows that in reality it is a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties. So far as it is a value in use, there is nothing mysterious about it .... The form of wood is altered by making a table out of it; nevertheless, this table remains wood, an ordinary material thing. As soon as it steps forth as commodity, however, it is transformed into a material immaterial thing. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in the face of all other commodities, it stands on its head, and out of its wooden brain it evolves notions more whimsically than if it had suddenly begun to dance. [G13a,2][429]

I believe that this passage marks Benjamin's Marxian starting point, which informs a great deal of the analysis in the *Arcades*. The mythic spell of Capital, or the experience of being submerged in the appearances of Capital, is theorized in a double sense, both of which have already been alluded to. First, the myth of the commodity, its fetish value, is

---

[429] "*'Eine Ware erscheint auf den ersten Blick ein selbstverständliches triviales Ding. Ihre Analyse ergibt, daß sie ein sehr vertracktes Ding ist, voll metaphysischer Spitzfindigkeit und theologisher Mucken. Soweit sie Gebrauchswert* [sic]*, ist nicht Mystisches an ihr...Die Form des Holzes wird verändert, wenn man aus ihm einen Tisch macht; nichtsdestoweniger bleibt der Tisch Holz, ein ordinäres sinnliches Ding. Aber sobald er als Ware auftritt, verwandelt er sich in ein sinnliches übersinnliches Ding. Er steht nicht nur mit seinen Füßen auf dem Boden, sondern er stellt sich allen anderen Waren gegenüber auf den Kopf und entwickelt aus seinem Holzkopf Grillen, viel wunderlicher, als wenn er aus freien Stücken zu tanzen begänne.*" The original citation is found in Marx, *Capital*, 163.

found in its promise to fulfill a wish, usually an archaic one deeply embedded within the text of a culture's imaginary. Second, and perhaps more importantly, it is mythic in the sense of being complicit in generating a circular temporality which condemns the working class to their bondage in a manner comparable to the bondage biblical theologians argued was endemic to the ancient Greek imaginary which regarded humans as inextricably bound to a pre-determined fate. For Benjamin, it is precisely the very new in modernity that wears the face of the "ever-same." "The essence of the mythical event," writes Benjamin in "Convolute D," "is return" [D10a,4].[430] The new is the old in the sense that Marx had discovered when he noted that exploitation takes place behind the backs of the workers. In the very newest commodity, in the newest fetishized item, the relations of production are reproduced, and if anything changes, it is often only the exploitative dimension that is intensified. The product may be new, but the modes of production, the relations of production, remain exploitative.

The productive dimension, and, therefore, the exploitative dimension, is not directly encountered in the commodity, however. This appearance of not being the result of a specific set of productive relations is what allows the commodity to function as a cipher, that is what allows it, in a psycho-social sense, to function as a fetish. A letter by Adorno, cited by Benjamin in "Convolute N," states, "[…] the alienated things are hollowed out and, as ciphers, they draw in meanings. Subjectivity takes possession of

---

[430] "*Die Essenz des mythischen Geschehens ist Wiederkehr.*"

them insofar as it invests them with intentions of desire and fear" [N5,2.][431] The alienated things are commodities, among other moments of the social, which in the context of actual lived experience, relate to the culture that consumes them as vessels that absorb the hopes and wishes of the public and reflects these back at those consumers. Since the commodity's history is not self-evidently inscribed upon its face, the cultural imaginary provides it with one drawn from the reservoir of myth.

Both of these aspects of myth, both of the appearances of Capital, need to be recognized simultaneously, if the awakening Benjamin hopes to effect is to occur. It is the contradiction between the hopes that accrue around the fetish dimension of the commodity and the objective social relations to which commodity production necessarily condemns the working class in Capital that represents the gate through which the Messiah might come. The potential to recognize this theological reality exists at any and all moments. This is the "messianic view," which, instead of seeing the world as "empty" and "homogeneous," recognizes the potential for agency based on the apprehension of social reality. The commodity here can be transposed into a dialectical-image, if the observer remembers the real history of production, that is, if the observer stands in a relation to the object in which a truth about both the observer and the object are revealed in their relation.

For Benjamin, the experience of living amongst the representations of Capital, in the psychic landscape of advertising, commodity display and commodity consumption is

---

[431] "[...] *Indem an Dingen ihr Gebrauchswert abstirbt, werden die entfremdeten ausgehölt und ziehen als Chiffern Bedeutungen herbei. Ihrer bemächtigt sich die Subjektivität, indem sie Intentionen von Wunsch und Angst in sie einlegt.*"

akin to living reality as a dream. "Capitalism was a natural phenomenon with which a new dream-filled sleep came over Europe, and, through it, a reactivation of mythic forces" [K1a,8.][432] The concept of the dream in Benjamin's work includes both meanings it has in colloquial English and German. To dream means to experience a reality that is fundamentally unreal, and, it references a wish, a hope, a desire. For Benjamin, this wish-fulfilling aspect of the commodity is conspicuously present in modern technology. Perhaps counter to contemporary discourses, modern technology is the very site of the archaic. "Only a thoughtless observer," Benjamin writes in "Convolute N":

> can deny that correspondences come into play between the world of modern technology and the archaic symbol-world of mythology. Of course, initially the technologically new seems nothing more than that. But in the very next childhood memory, its traits are already altered. Every childhood achieves something great and irreplaceable for humanity. By the interest it takes in technological phenomena, by the curiosity its displays before any sort of invention or machinery, every childhood binds the accomplishments of technology to the old worlds of symbol. There is nothing in the realm of nature that from the outset would be exempt from such a bond. Only, it takes form not in the aura of novelty but in the aura of the habitual. In memory, childhood, and dream. [N2a,1][433]

---

[432] "*Der Kapitalismus war eine Naturerscheinung, mit der ein neuer Traumschlaf über Europa kam und in ihm eine Reaktivierung der mythischen Kräfte.*"

[433] *Daß zwischen der Welt der modernen Technik und der archaischen Symbolwelt der Mythologie Korrespondenzen spielen, kann nur der gedankenlose Betrachter leugnen. Zunächst wirkt das technisch Neue freilich allein als solches. Aber schon in der nächsten kindlichen Erinnerung ändert es seine Züge. Jede Kindheit leistet etwas Großes,*

In technology the dreams of previous generations are realized. However, being realized does not mean technology is any less an element of the dream. Instead, actual technological innovations represent a movement from one level of the dream to another: It is the movement from the dream, in the sense of an un-fulfilled wish, to one that is fulfilled, but is not experienced in its reality.

"Convolute G," entitled "Iron Construction," begins with a quote from Michelet that each epoch dreams the one to follow. Later in the *Arcades*, Benjamin adds a poetic description by Ferdinand Langlé and Emile Vanderbruch, which brilliantly depicts how the future tends to be imagined through the categories of the past:

> Yes, when all the world from Paris to China
>
> Pays heed to your doctrine, O divine Saint-Simon,
>
> The glorious Golden Age will be reborn.
>
> Rivers will flow with chocolate and tea,
>
> Sheep roasted whole will frisk on the plain,
>
> And sautéed pole will swim in the Seine.
>
> Fricasseed spinach will grow on the ground,
>
> Garnished with crushed fried croutons;
>
> The trees will bring forth apple compotes,
>
> And farmers will harvest boots and coats.

Unersetzliches für die technischen Phänomene, ihre Neugier für alle Art von Erfindungen und Maschinerien die technischen Errungenschaften an die alten Symbolwelten. Es gibt nichts im Bereiche der Natur, das solcher Bindung von Hause aus entzogen wäre. Nur bildet sie sich nicht in der Aura der Neuheit sondern in der der Gewöhnung. In Erinnerung, Kindheit und Traum."

It will snow wine, it will rain chickens,

And ducks cooked with turnips will fall from the sky[434]

(*Arcades*, 171; *GS5*, 232)*

If Benjamin is correct in holding that the inspiration for technological innovation is in part derived from the archive of a culture's imaginary, then it seems plausible that this reading can be done in reverse. The appearance of modern technology can be seen as providing insight into the collective dreams of a people, and technological innovations furnish an opportunity for the cultural analyst to interpret these dreams. Benjamin provides the opening for this mass dream analysis when he suggests that what is internal for the individual, such as health and the unconscious, is externalized for the collective [K1,5.] Manifestations of the social collective, architecture, museums, public spaces, commodities, and technological innovations, are manifestations of the collective unconscious. "Not architecture alone but all technology is, at certain stages, evidence of a collective dream" [F1a,2.][435] Contrary to Weber's notion that the modern social is de-mythologized, for Benjamin it represents the very site of the mythic, because it is here that the wishes of the past are coming to fruition.

---

[434] "*Oui, quand le monde entier, de Paris jusqu'en Chine, / O divin Saint-Simon, sera dans ta doctrine, / L'âge d'or doit renaître avec tout son éclat, / Les fleuves rouleront du thé, du chocolat; / Les moutons tout rôtis bondiront dans la plaine, / Et les brochets au bleu nageront dans la Seine; / Les épinards viendront au monde fricassés, / Avec des croûton frits tout autout concassés; / Et l'on moissonnera des carricks et des bottes; Il neigera du vin, il pleuvra des poulets, / Et du ciel les canards tomberont aux navets.*"

* This quote does not correspond to the pagination otherwise used in the *Arcades Project* and is therefore cited in the same manner as Benjamin's other works have been.

[435] "*Auch die Technik, nicht nur die Architektur, ist in gewissen Stadien Zeugnis eines Kollektivtraums.*"

The fetish dimension of the commodity has a short half-life, however. Since the essence of the commodity, at least its fetish essence, is shaped by the psychic character of the culture that consumes it, the fetish dimension is inherently unstable. The commodities, which function as ciphers that absorb and then project back at the consumer the promises of archaic dreams, sooner or later dissolve, and the commodity begins to take on the aura of trash. Yet, before becoming trash, the commodity presents a revelatory opportunity to the observer. In the constellation produced by the trace of what was once hoped for in the commodity, in conjunction with the reality of the commodity as just another piece of consumer culture, decaying and out of fashion, a moment of potential opens up, where the myth can be more readily apprehended than when it is shrouded in the hopes and desires of the collective. The reality that emerges is that the archaic dream of freedom offered up in the commodity is predicated on bondage. This logic can be made more accessible by briefly referring to Aristotelian value-ethics.

Aristotle was not the first to theorize that behind most desires lies the ultimate desire to be happy. Happiness is the final end that is not desired for any other reason but is an end-in-itself. The wishes archived in the cultural imaginary, the wish to fly, possess magical healing powers, have easy access to good food and drink, live without needing to work, and the like, are desires of a second order. These desires are desired for what they might provide those who posses them, the final end to be happy. Hobbes' famous passage from the *Leviathan* that life in a state of war is "solitary, nasty, brutish and short" could be easily expanded beyond the conditions of war to include the experiences most people of all epochs not born in the lap of luxury. Dreams of being free from the

harassing conditions of everyday life, mediated through the socio-historical categories available to these dreamers, is given in the description of the utopian condition by Langlé and Vanderbruch cited above. Although the dreams of liberation from oppression and suffering take on the garb of fantastic imaginings, the underlying desire is Aristotle's ultimate end, happiness. It is less the ability to fly, to heal, or to conjure enormous meals than the final desire to be happy, healthy and free that is actually at play. This, however, is precisely the contradiction that inheres in the commodity. While the commodity actually bestows the magical powers previous epochs could only dream of, they provide them on the condition that the ultimate end, happiness, is not fulfilled. Like a mariner adrift on the ocean who dehydrates herself ever more when she tries to quench her thirst by drinking salt water, the commodity takes away more happiness than it provides. This contradiction, Benjamin believes, becomes temporarily legible in the commodity as the fetish luster dissipates and as the commodity moves on its psycho-social journey from an object of wish-fulfillment to trash. On this path, there is a crucial moment, when both realities are present simultaneously, the presence of the pagan-mythic hope and the theological reality, the hell of exploitation upon which it is founded and which it simultaneously re-establishes.

This is Benjamin's logic behind choosing the Parisian arcades as his model for a phenomenological investigation of the experience of Capital and the history of modernity. In their time, the Parisian arcades represented the height of modernity. They incarnated the dreams of a previous epoch and the hopes for a utopic future. Built with the new glass and steel construction materials, the arcades represented an incredible inversion of

norms that signaled the radical departure of modernity from previous epochs. The outside was made inside. The night was turned into day. Products from all four corners of the world were on display next to each other, their juxtaposition in the exhibition stalls as "natural" as various species of foliage growing in a forest. The arcades were also the fashionable places to be seen. They created the flaneur who could amble along the long passageways, endlessly "indoors," although not necessarily in shops. Benjamin explains the relation between the arcades and the dream world in "Convolute K":

> But just as the sleeper – in this respect like the madman – sets out on the macrocosmic journey through his own body, and the noises and feelings of his insides, such as blood pressure, intestinal churn, heartbeat, and muscle sensation (which for the waking and salubrious individual converge in a steady surge of health) generate, in the extravagantly heightened inner awareness of the sleeper, illusion or dream imagery which translates and accounts for them, so likewise for the dreaming collective, which, through the arcades, communes with its own insides. We must follow in its wake so as to expound the nineteenth century – in fashion and advertising, in buildings and politics – as the outcome of its dream visions. [K1,4][436]

---

[436] "*Wie nun der Schläfer aber – darin dem Irren gleich – durch seinen Leib die makrokosmische Reise antritt und die Geräusche und Gefühle des eignen Innern, die dem Gesunden, Wachen sich zur Brandung der Gesundheit zusammenfügen, Blutdruck, Bewegungen der Eingeweide, Herzschlag und Muskelempfinden in seinen unerhört geschärften innern Sinnen Wahn oder Traumbild, die sie übersetzen und erklären, zeugen, so geht es auch dem träumenden Kollektivum, das in Passagen in sein Inneres sich vertieft. Ihm müssen wir darin nachgehen, um das XIX Jahrundert in Mode und Reklame, Bauten und Politik als die Folge seiner Traumgeschichte zu deuten.*"

Following Benjamin's logic, if the arcades express the collective dreams of the culture from which they arose, and if they occupy a conspicuous place in the dream lives of the moderns, then the arcades can also be read as a dream element, as part of the (Durkheimian, not Jungian) collective unconscious. The arcades, however, are not read at the moment when they incarnate the wish, but rather when this fetish dimension is already waning.

As Benjamin notes, by the time the last of the arcades was being constructed, the entire idea had decayed into utter kitsch. That moment of decay represents the liberatory potential, when the arcades could be recognized for what they had always been. The myth of the arcades gestured to the new abilities of modern technology, the power of industry, the liberties of the Parisian bourgeoisie. Yet, in reality, the arcades were never more than a momentary manifestation of the collective dream, supported by the continuous exploitation of the working class. Recognizing the arcades as a manifestation of modernity's dream means recognizing the mythic dimension of Capital, and seeing the actual as opposed to apparent history that underlies the commodities existence. This recognition, produced through the momentary constellation of the trace of the fetish in relation to the ascending sign of trash, allows, Benjamin hopes, for the Janus face of history to be apprehended. Does this recognition then represent the beginning of a truly revolutionary movement that is not reabsorbed into another mythic imaginary? Benjamin believes this to be so. Or at least, according to Benjamin's philosophy, this is what needs to occur if a truly liberatory movement is not to re-establish the very conditions of servitude that it aims to abolish. Unlike the German Social Democrats, or the

functionaries of any of the actually existing socialist state, and unlike the liberals, positivists, and vulgar-Marxists, who were all encumbered by mythic consciousness, the historical materialist is the one properly positioned to recognize the mythic dimension of Capital and, therefore, the only one capable of pulling the emergency brake on the train of "progress."

IV – The Rescuing Gaze

For Benjamin, the dialectical-image represents a revolutionary/messianic opportunity. However, since the essence of the object is constituted in relation with the observer, and since the object, the commodity, is a cipher, the moment of recognition is located in a change in the psychic relation to the object, in a change in the gaze. That is, in order to be in a position to recognize the crucial moment, the reader, the historian, the philosopher, the critic and the revolutionary, must adopt the proper historical materialist perspective. For Benjamin, this gaze is that of the melancholic, the mournful, the saturnine thinker. He explains:

> Mourning is the state of mind in which feeling revives the empty world in the form of a mask, and derives an enigmatic satisfaction in contemplating it. Every feeling is bound to an *a priori* object, and the representation of this object is its phenomenology. Accordingly the theory of mourning [...] can only be developed in the description of that world which is revealed under the gaze of the melancholy man. For feelings, however vague they may seem when perceived by the self,

> respond like a motorial reaction to a concretely structured world. (*Tragic Drama* 139; *GS1*, 318)[437]

Benjamin suggest that it is the melancholic who achieves the degree of self-alienation necessary to engage the world allegorically.

> The deadening of the emotions, and the ebbing away of the waves of life which are the source of these emotions in the body, can increase the distance between the self and the surrounding world to the point of alienation from the body. As soon as this symptom of depersonalization was seen as an intense degree of mournfulness, the concept of the pathological state, in which the most simple object appears to be a symbol of some enigmatic wisdom because it lacks any natural, creative relationship to us, was set in an incomparably productive context. (*Tragic Drama*, 140; *GS1*, 319)[438]

There is a two-fold expression of the melancholic position. On the one hand, the melancholic is dull and slow. Perhaps for this reason, in the paradigmatic depiction of

---

[437] "*Trauer ist die Gesinnung, in der das Gefühl die entleerte Welt maskenhaft neubelebt, um ein rätselhaftes Genügen an ihrem Anblick zu haben. Jedes Gefühl ist gebunden an einen apriorischen Gegenstand und dessen Darstellung ist seine Phänomenologie. Die Theorie der Trauer [...] ist demnach nur der Beschreibung jener Welt, die unterm Blick des Melancholischen sich auftut, zu entrollen. Denn die Gefühle, wie vage immer sie der Selbstwahrnehmung scheinen mögen, erwidern als motorisches Gebaren einem gegenständlichen Aufbau der Welt.*"

[438] "*Die Ertötung der Affekte, mit der die Lebenswellen verebben, aus denen sie sich im Leibe erheben, vermag die Distanz von der Umwelt bis zur Entfremdung vom eigenen Körper zu führen. Indem man dies Symptom der Depersonalisation als schweren Grad des Traurigseins erfaßte, trat der Begriff von dieser pathologischen Verfassung, in welcher jedes unscheinbarste Ding, weil die natürliche und schaffende Beziehung zu ihm fehlt, as Chiffer einer rätselhaften Weisheit auftritt, in einen unvergleichlich fruchtbaren Zusammenhang.*"

sorrowful contemplation, Albrecht Dürer's *Melancholia I*,[439] the dog and the stone, both emblems of sloth are in the foreground. On the other hand, the apathetic behaviour of the melancholic is associated with deep contemplation, of ever deepening penetration of the object. "The theory of melancholy has a very close connection with the doctrine of stellar influences. And of such influences only the most baleful, that of Saturn, could rule over the melancholy disposition" (*Tragic Drama*, 148; *GS1*, 326.)[440] However, while, "The astronomical explanation of this is obscure [...]," it becomes less so if:

> the distance of the planet from the earth and consequently long duration of its orbit are no longer conceived in the negative sense of the Salerno doctors, but rather in a beneficent sense, with reference to the divine reason which assigns the menacing star to the remotest place, and if, on the other hand, the introspection of the melancholy man is understood with reference to Saturn which "as the highest planet and the one farthest from everyday life, the originator of all deep contemplation, calls the soul from externalities into the inner world, causes it to rise ever higher, finally endowing it with the utmost knowledge and with the gift of prophecy." (*Tragic Drama*, 149; *GS1*, 326-327)[441]

---

[439] Albrecht Dürer, *Melancholia I*, Staatliche Kunsthalle , Karlsruhe.

[440] "*Die Theorie der Melancholie steht in genauem Zusammenhang mit der Lehre von den Gestirneinflüssen. Und unter ihnen konnte nur der unheilvollste, jener des Saturn, der melancholischen Gemütsart vorgesetzt sein.*"

[441] "*Hier ist die astronomische Deduktion dunkel. Anders wenn die Erdferne und die damit gegebene lange Umlaufszeit des Planeten nicht mehr im bösen Sinne, dem die Ärzte von Salreno folgen, vielmehr mit einem Hinweis auf die göttliche Vernuft, die dem bedrohlichen Gestirn den fernsten Platz verordnet, in einem segensreichen aufgefaßt und andererseits der Tiefsinn des Betrübten aus Saturn begriffen wird, der, 'als höchster und dem täglichen Leben fernstehender Planet, als der Urheber jeder tiefen Kontemplation*

The Melancholic (dis)position, then, is characterized by alienation, by contemplation, and deliberateness verging on the paralytic. It is the melancholic who has the gift of prophecy, especially of receiving prophetic dreams, and also the power of divination. However, this position is also one of madness. The affinity between the melancholic and certain forms of psychopathology is noted by Benjamin in the melancholic's drive to uncover non-sensuous relationships, in the allegorical faculty. Like the schizophrenic, the allegorist engages in a certain type of "magical reading" by establishing relationships of meaning that disrupt normative interpretations of the world. Meaning is derived by discerning new relationships among objects which can all be read as signs in themselves. In this relationship, the notion of divination is of particular interest, since divination consists precisely in the act of culling meaning from objects that do not bear any obvious relationship to the human realm. The astrologer is perhaps the archetype of this method; one which shares important features with Benjamin's notions of translation and metaschematizing.[442] Indeed, divination is allegory of the social by another name. The melancholic position is the subjective state of the allegorist, who recognizes that everything is, at least potentially, readable. The allegorical position is one

---

die Seele von Äußerlichkeiten ins Innere ruft, sie immer höher steigen läßt und schließlich mit dem höchsten Wissen und prophetischen Gaben beschenkt. "

[442] Michael Opitz, "Ähnlichkeit," in *Benjamins Begriffe*, vol. 1, ed. Michael Opitz and Erdmund Wizisla (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2000), 46 – 47: "*Demnach setzt Übersetzen magisches Lesen voraus. Wie der Astrologe, der aus der Stellung der Planeten etwas herausliest, was nicht geschrieben steht, muß der Übersetzer das im Original Intendierte in eine andere Sprache übertragen.*"

part that comprises the gaze needed to discover the theological truth behind, or perhaps more precisely within the myth of modernity.

The "unit" of allegorical interpretation is the emblem. It is a synecdoche, a condensed reference, that gestures to a more elaborate meaning or narrative. In the mourning plays which Benjamin examines in the *Tragic Drama*, emblems appear as staging devises to indicate the relationship a given character has to the plot. For Benjamin, the baroque emblem re-appears in modernity as the commodity. Indeed, the fetish dimension of the commodity functions in essentially the same way as an emblem in a Baroque tragedy. In "Convolute J," Benjamin elaborates on the fetish character of the commodity, explaining that its meaning is its price:

> The "metaphysical subtleties" in which the commodity delights, according to Marx, are, above all, the subtleties of price formation. How the price of goods in each case is arrived at can never quite be foreseen, neither in the course of their production nor later when they enter the market. It is exactly the same with the object in its allegorical existence. At no point is it written in the stars that the allegorists' profundity will lead it to one meaning rather than another. And though it once may have acquired such a meaning, this can always be withdrawn in favor of a different meaning. The modes of meaning fluctuate almost as rapidly as the price of commodities. In fact, the meaning of the commodity *is* its price; it has, as commodity, no other meaning. Hence, the allegorist is in his element with commercial wares. As flaneur, he has empathized with the soul of the commodity;

> as allegorist, he recognizes in the "price tag," with which the merchandise comes on the market, the object of his broodings – the meaning. [J80,2; J80a,1][443]

Benjamin is asking the reader of the *Arcades* to read the commodity as the baroque allegorist reads the emblem. Yet, this reading occurs in a double sense.

We have seen that the *Arcades* as a text references the actual Parisian arcades. In these arcades, commodities were exhibited without regard for the history of their production. The displays of commodities brings them into an entirely haphazard relationships with one another. So too the *Arcades* text brings its fragments together without discernable connections. Headings for the convolutes, say, "Fashion" or "Dream House," offer only the most tentative organizational frame. Indeed, these headings give the reader about as much insight into the content of a given convolute as the name "Curiosity Shoppe" would give the passerby in the actual arcades insight into the contents of its wares. Similarly, if the text itself cites the indoor shops of Paris, the fragments which comprise the individual interpretive units of the *Arcades* cite the commodities themselves. The reader of the *Arcades* is being trained to read the commodities of the

---

[443] "*Die 'metaphysischen Spitzfindigkeiten,' in denen sie sich nach Marx gefällt, sind vor allem die Spitzfindigkeiten der Preisgestaltung. Wie die Ware zum Preis kommt, das läßt sich nie ganz absehen, weder im Lauf ihrer Herstellung noch später wenn sie sich auf dem Markt befindet. Ganz ebenso ergeht es dem Gegenstand in seiner allegorischen Existenz. Es ist ihm nicht an der Wiege gesungen worden, zu welcher Bedeutung der Tiefsinn des Allegorikers ihn befördern wird. Hat er aber solche Bedeutung einmal erhalten, so kann sie ihm jederseit gegen eine andere Bedeutung entzogen werden. Die Moden der Bedeutungen wechselten fast so schnell wie der Preis für die Waren wechselt. In der Tat heißt die Bedeutung der Ware: Preis; eine andere hat sie, als Ware, nicht. Darum ist der Allegoriker mit der Ware in seinem Element. Als flaneur hat er in die Warenseele sich eingefühlt; als Allegoriker erkent er im 'Preisetikett,' mit dem die Ware den Markt betritt, den Gegenstand seiner Grübelei – die Bedeutung – wieder.*"

modern European social by reading the fragments of the text allegorically. New interpretations of the social continuously present themselves to the attentive (that is, melancholic historical materialist) observer since the commodities of modernity are thrust into new relations through new juxtapositions, not determined beforehand by the logic of their production but rather by a fetishistic logic.

As Wiesenthal notes, the "epistemological" significance of allegory for Benjamin is in setting phenomena free from the relations in which they have existed since the biblical Fall. The allegorical method consists of a certain *kombinatoric*, in which phenomena as ideas as images are shuffled into new relationships.[444] Benjamin relates the allegorical method to the heraldic device of the rebus. Like the elements that compose the rebus, these monadic images, the commodities, are abstracted from the "false unity" in which they often appear. This, we recall, is the work of the concept, which has both an analytic and a synthetic function. As Linder explains in his article "Allegorie," for something to be the object of allegorical contemplation, it must be de-contextualized, fragmented and isolated.[445] "Phenomena," Benjamin reminds us, "do not [...] enter the realm of ideas whole, in their crude empirical state, adulterated by appearances, but only in their basic elements, redeemed" (*Tragic Drama*, 33; *GS1*, 213.)[446] Wiesenthal makes the connection between allegory and the rebus explicit, noting

---

[444] Wisenthal, *Zur Wissenschaftstheorie Walter Benjamins*, 135.
[445] Burkhardt Lindner, "Allegorie," in *Benjamins Begriffe*, vol. 1, ed. Michael Opitz and Erdmund Wizisla (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2000), 67.
[446] "*Die Phänomene gehen aber nicht integral in ihrem rohen empirischen Bestande, dem der Schein sich beimischt, sondern in ihren Elementen allein, gerettet, in das Reich der Ideen ein.*"

that, for Benjamin, allegory is expression in the same manner as language is expression. The principle behind image combination is similar to the method of word combination.[447]

There are other instructive instances of redoubling that occur throughout the *Arcades* text. As suggested above, trash has a certain critical potential inscribed upon it that becomes legible as the fetish character of the commodity wanes. This makes the figure of the rag-picker a significant trope, one that references the author himself. Benjamin is the textual rag-picker, collecting forgotten, seemingly useless pieces of Capital's debris in order to re-function them for his own purposes. In collecting precisely the refuse of modernity, Benjamin is strategically collecting those elements where the trace of the new and the trace of the old collide to expose a truth previously hidden.

If Benjamin is the rag-picker, the reader, as was suggested above, is cast as the flaneur, strolling through the arcades with a certain, critical distance. The flaneur is the melancholic by another name, an allegorist, in that he is not fully engaged with the mercantile dimension of the arcades, but rather views the fetish content as if from above. He strolls by windows, looks at the other shoppers, but feels apart from the crowed. The flaneur *par excellence* for Benjamin was Baudelaire, who as a subject of the *Arcades Project* comprises its largest section. Baudelaire represents the position the reader needs to take vis-à-vis the *Arcades* as a text, and commodity fetishism in the world of capitalist modernity. As Benjamin reads him, Baudelaire was an allegorist and a theologian of modernity.

---

[447] Wiesenthal, *Zur Wissenschaftstheorie Walter Benjamins*, 106.

If Benjamin is the rag-picker and the reader a Baudelaire-like flaneur, Benjamin also includes two archetypes that function as antipodes to the correct way of reading the real, the gambler and the collector. The gambler is under the influence of a mythic temporality. He lives the boredom of homogeneous empty time. Time, for the gambler, knows no messianic opportunity of awakening. It is the time of factory work, of liberal and positivist beliefs in natural social progress. Boredom marks the gamblers psychic existence as it does that of the melancholic, but unlike the latter, the gambler attempts to use this state to produce an infernal "satisfaction." Instead of recognizing the revolutionary potential that inheres in each moment, the gambler turns homogeneous empty time into a narcotic. That is to say, Benjamin recognizes the similarity between games of chance and factory work, as intimated in my previous chapter. The factory work of pulling the levers of a machine is duplicated in the gambling halls, where pulling levers on a slot machine, or turning the roulette wheel, make the few seconds of waiting for the outcome, as close to anything like a true liberatory release as they will ever achieve.

The other antipode in the *Arcades* is the collector, who unlike the gambler is not so much trapped by the fetish dimension of the commodity as by the liberal philosophical malady of constructing universalisms and totalities. For the collector, the commodity's use-value is its fetish-value. This point alone suggests why Benjamin maintains that the collector, "lives a piece of the dream life" [H1a,5.][448] However, the activity of collecting itself also bears traces of the mythic. Detaching the commodity from its use-value allows

[448] "*[...] lebt der Sammler [...] ein Stück des Traumlebens.*"

it to "enter into the closest conceivable relation to things of the same kind" [H1a,2.][449] This is the logic of mimesis, which is the underlying logic of the mythic. In establishing relations of sameness at the level of the fetish, the collector strives for a certain "completeness." This desire too is indicative of the "mythic consciousness" of the collector. It echoes critiques of totalities in philosophy, suggested, for example, by Adorno in *Negative Dialectics*. Like Baudelaire, and like the flaneur, the collector too is an allegorist, albeit a mythic allegorist, who, like the Surrealists, only dreams of waking up. The collector is the "interpreter of fate," a fundamentally mythic category. For Benjamin following the Augustinian tradition, the opposite of fate is the freedom promised in the biblical tradition; freedom is theological. Whereas the collector represents the allegorist trapped by the mythic, the Baudelairian allegorists is one whose readings are informed by the theological.

As Benjamin argues – see my discussion in Chapter Three – the Baroque allegorists faced the threat of a semiotic descent into meaninglessness that resulted from the fact that any sign could be potentially related to any signifier. Benjamin follows the Baroque allegorists in positing theology as the underlying assurance of a "really-real" beyond the illusion of myth, which assures meaning can be culled from the confusion of signs. That is to say that the allegorist of commodity fetishism is tethered to a certain exegesis. There is a definite interpretive trajectory. Benjamin writes, "Melancholy betrays the world for the sake of knowledge. But in its tenacious self-absorption it embraces dead objects in its contemplation, in order to redeem them" (*Tragic Drama*,

---

[449] "*[...] um in die denkbar engste Beziehung zu seinesgleichen zu treten.*"

157; 334.)[450] The purpose of allegory is redemptive. Its goal is to glimpse the truth of the fetish within the fetish. The redemption of the object is its rescue from oblivion and rescue occurs through attention and remembrance.

V – A Baudelairan Theology of Hell

Benjamin speaks about modernity as hell in a number of senses. Capitalist modernity is the time of hell, it is the place of hell, and its cultural manifestations, such as paper money, are the emblems of hell. First, it is important to note that throughout the *Arcades*, Benjamin reiterates his central points variously in religious, aesthetic, political (esp. Marxian) and psychoanalytic discourses. Hell is the theological expression of what in the psychoanalytic idiom is the unconscious state, plagued by irrational and threatening dreams as opposed to a lucid, conscious waking life. The justification for this translation between theoretical paradigms is not only given in his theory of translation. With respect to the psychoanalytic it is based on Benjamin taking rather literally his assertion that what is internal for the individual is external for the collective [K1,5.]

For Benjamin there is a parallel between a personal Freudian psychological topography and the architectural and spatial forms of the city. Hell in a psychoanalytic idiom is the unconscious, but the hell of the collective is physically located in specific areas of the city. Benjamin elaborates:

---

[450] "*Die Melancholie verrät die Welt um des Wissens willen. Aber ihre ausdauernde Versunkenheit nimmt die toten Dinge in ihre Kontemplation auf, um sie zu retten.*"

> One knew of places in ancient Greece where the way led down into the underworld. Our waking existence likewise is a land which, at certain hidden points, leads down into the underworld – a land full of inconspicuous places from which dreams arise. All day long, suspecting nothing, we pass them by, but no sooner has sleep come than we are eagerly groping our way back to lose ourselves in the dark corridors. By day, the labyrinth of urban dwellings resembles consciousness the arcades (which are galleries leading into the city's past) issue unremarked onto the streets. At night, however, under the enormous mass of houses, their denser darkness protrudes like a threat, and the nocturnal pedestrian hurries past – unless, that is, we have emboldened him to turn into the narrow lane. [C1a,2][451]

While this description of the city as reflecting dimensions of a Freudian psychology seems to remain a metaphor, the continuation of this passage demonstrates that Benjamin takes these descriptions somewhat literally.

> But another system of galleries runs underground through Paris: the Métro, where at dusk glowing red lights point the way into the underworld of names [....] they have

---

[451] "*Man zeigte im alten Griechenland Stellen, an denen es in die Unterwelt hinabging. Auch unser waches Dasein ist ein Land, in dem es an verborgenen Stellen in die Unterwelt hinabgeht, voll unscheinbarer Örter, wo die Traume münden. Alle Tage gehen wir nichtsahnend an ihnen vorüber, kaum aber kommt der Schlaf, so tasten wir mit geschwinden Griffen zu ihnen zurück und verlieren uns in den dunklen Gängen. Das Häuserlabyrinth der Städte gleicht am hellen Tage dem Bewußtsein; die Passagen (das sind die Galerien, die in ihr vergangenes Dasein führen) münden tagsüber unbemerkt in die Straßen Nachts unter den dunklen Häusermassen aber tritt ihr kompakteres Dunkel erschreckend heraus und der spate Passant hastet an ihnen vorüber, es sei denn, daß wir ihn zur Reise durch die schmale Gasse ermuntert haben.*"

> all thrown off the humiliating fetters of street or square, and here in the lightning-scored, whistle-resounding darkness are transformed into misshapen sewer gods, catacomb fairies. This labyrinth harbors in its interior not one but a dozen blind raging bulls, into whose jaws not one Theban virgin once a year but thousands of anemic young dressmakers and drowsy clerks every morning must hurl themselves. [C1a,2][452]

Hell, for Benjamin, can be spatially located in the modern capitalist city. Indeed, it is often these nether regions that capitalist production takes place. Even if the factories are not necessarily located underground, there is a certain demarcation which separates the darkened spaces of production from the bright daylight of industrial consumption.

As was suggested above in relation to the discussion of the fetish dimensions of the commodity, the hell of modernity is also marked by a circular temporality. So as not to cause any undue confusion: hell is modernity seen in its truth. Hell is what the historical materialist sees, while the mythic is modernity's hell as experienced by those who are still asleep. There exists, therefore, a necessary conflation of the language of myth and theology that relates to the position of the analyst vis-à-vis the social. The time of hell is endless repetition. In this, Benjamin sees Nietzsche's eternal return of the same

---

[452] "*Aber ein anderes System von Galerien, die unterirdisch durch Paris sich hinziehen: die Métro, wo am Abend rot die Lichter aufglühen, die den Weg in den Hades der Namen zeigen. [... Sie] haven die schmachvollen Ketten der rue, der place von sich abgeworfen, sind hier im blitzdurchzuckten, pfiffdurchgellten Dunkel zu ungestalten Kloakengöttern, Katakombenfeen geworden. Dies Labyrinth beherbergt in seinem Innern nicht einen sondern Dutzende blinder, rasender Stiere, in deren Rachen nicht järlich eine thebanische Jungfrau, sondern allmorgentlich tausende bleichsüchtiger Midinetten, unausgeschlafener Kommis sich werfen müssen.*"

as an almost prophetic condemnation of modernity. Unlike Nietzsche's demon, the thought of whom is to inspire moderns to engage life more rigorously since it may need to be repeated in exactly the same way to eternity, the eternal return for Benjamin is simply a description of the conditions of the oppressed classes who labour under the god of Capital. The sign of this circular temporality is boredom. Benjamin establishes the connection between hell, the mythic, the psychoanalytic and a Marxian politic, when he writes that, "Boredom – as index to participation in the sleep of the collective"[453] [D3,7], or when he quotes Michelet, "There were 'true hells of boredom' in the spinning and weaving mills: '*Ever, ever, ever*, is the unvarying word thundering in your ears from the automatic equipment which shakes even the floor. One can never get used to it"[454] [D4,5.]

The hell of modernity, then, is spatially behind or below the public spaces of the city. Its temporarily is marked by a continuous repetition and return. It is the time of assembly line factory work, where each day bleeds into another, and each movement is the same as the one before. This repetition is also manifested in the fact that the broader social relations of oppression are not mitigated by future events. Subjectively, this state is marked by a certain *ennui*, a boredom, which again gestures towards the dream-like quality of modernity, the phenomenological experience of life lived under the spell of Capital's myth. In all of this, which Marx also noted, and which establishes an important

---

[453] "*Langeweile – als Index für Teilnahme am Schlaf des Kollektivs.*"

[454] "[...] *forme une description, pleine d'intelligence et de pitié, de la condition, vers 1840, des premiers manœuvres specialises. Voici 'l'enfer de l'ennui' dans les tissages: 'Toujours, toujours, toujours, c'est le mot invariable que tonne á notre oreille le roulement automatique dont tremblent les planches.' Jamais l'on ne s'y habitue.*"

relationship with Durkheim's notion of the religious, the alienation of workers also leads to a mythic experience of the social, in that humanly created forces, such as the economy, take on independent and threatening objective guises, like gods of the ancient pantheon. This is the overwhelming experience of a mythic engagement with Capital, the experience to which Capital predisposes its subject. Since value-creation takes place behind the backs of the workers, there is a sense in which these relations of production are not seen as relations among people but, as Marx noted, as relations among things. Things, objective forces, economic "laws," then, are what determine human life the way pagan gods determined the lives of the ancients.

Throughout "Convolute J," Benjamin associates Baudelaire with Satan. He includes a passage from Albert Thibaudet with reference to Baudelaire, which reads, "He's just a Satan with a furnished apartment, a Beelzebub of the dinner table"[455] [J13a,5.] In another quote, the same author is somewhat more cautious, noting that, "The philosophical and literary Catholicism ... of Baudelaire had need of an intermediate position ... where it could take up its abode between God and the Devil"[456] [J3,1.] Later, Benjamin finds another quote for the allegorical poet of modernity: "He would have nothing to do with women if he were not hoping that, through them, he could offend God and make the angels weep" [J17a,1.][457] Benjamin characterizes Baudelaire's work as an

---

[455] "*Ce n'est qu'un Satan hôtel garni, un Belzébuth de table d'hôte.*"
[456] "*Le catholicisme ... philosophique et littéraire de Baudelaire avait besoin d'un lieu intermédiare ... oú se loger entre Dieu et le diable.*"
[457] "*Il laisserait les femmes bien tranquilles s'il n'espérait point, par leur moyen, offenser Dieu et faire pleurer les anges.*"

"apocalyptic reverie" [J47a,3.][458] Although the Satanic might not generally be associated with theology, Benjamin astutely notes that, "We may call it theological, insofar as hell is a subject of theology" [D5a,6.][459]

The association of the archetype of modern allegorical reading as incarnating the gaze of Satan is not simply hyperbole, but is consistent with the figure of the Devil in orthodox readings of the second creation narrative in Genesis. After all, it was the snake who convinced the "first humans" to betray "the world for the sake of knowledge." Unlike the earlier reading of Genesis examined in Chapter Two with respect to Benjamin's theory of language, where the Devil's temptation leads to the solipsism or relativism to which the positivists are condemned, the allegorist's engagement with the realm of knowledge is for the eventual purpose of redemption. Even this reading of Satan in the Fall of humanity can be integrated within an admittedly heterodox interpretation of the second Genesis creation story.

This heterodox reading stems from questions regarding God's omniscience. The central theological issue can be stated as follows: Why did God include the snake in the garden, if he knew that this would be the eventual source of the Fall of humanity and its continuous suffering? If God's omnipotence and omniscience is affirmed, then the Manichean answer that there exists a force equal but opposite to that of God, the Devil, cannot be tolerated. However, another solution suggests itself: perhaps the snake represents a necessary station on the path to redemption. If the Genesis narrative is read

---

458 "[...] *apokalyptischen Träumerei* [...]"
459 "*Sofern die Hölle ein theologischer Gegenstand ist, kann man sie in der Tat eine theologische nennen.*"

in conjunction with the first creation story, as well as in relation to the entire biblical narrative, it can be argued that the Fall of humanity is necessary in order to enable the journey back. The origin is the goal, but the goal is changed by the journey; it is no longer the same place one left.[460] The entire biblical text can be read as the continual development of the themes of exile and return. Perhaps exile is necessary, and perhaps the snake is God's agent in the garden. Benjamin's own description of the allegorist emphasizes this moment of exile in the concept of alienation. As he notes, only in the melancholic, who experiences a particularly intense form of alienation, does the allegorical faculty become truly operative. The temptation of Adam and Eve is not simply the temptation to groundless empirical knowledge, but also, and at the same time, the condition for the long journey home.

Benjamin's Baudelaire incarnates a satanic gaze, which reveals the hellish aspects of the modern social. "Baudelaire, in contrast," quotes Benjamin, "*actually* incarnated modern man – the man of the nineteenth century – in the prison of hell" [J42,1.][461] Earlier in this convolute, Benjamin notes a convergence between "the modern and the demonic,"[462] [J4a,4] and then goes on to speak of the, "*Fleurs du mal,*" as "the *Inferno* of the nineteenth century. But Baudelaire's despair carries him infinitely beyond the wrath

---

[460] See, Gershom Scholem, "Toward an Understanding of the Messianic Idea," in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 13.
[461] "*Lui, Baudelaire, il écroua* réellement *dans la prison d'enfer l'homme moderne, l'homme du dixneuviéme siècle.*"
[462] "*Konjunktion des Modernen und des Dämonischen* [....]"

of Dante" [J11,4.][463] Baudelaire's satanic gaze sinks the appearances of the modern into a chthonic underworld where its true appearance as mythic, demonic, and dreamlike can be registered. The task of the allegorist, however, is to redeem these forms, to rescue phenomena from its false appearance and integrating them into the realm of ideas.

[463] "Les fleurs du mal *sont* l'enfer *du XIX siècle. Mais le désespoir de Baudelaire l'emporte infiniment sur la colére de Dante.*"

Conclusion – Towards A Political-Theology of the "Secular" Social

What follows is no longer bound directly to Benjamin's texts but represents a speculative attempt to develop aspects of his strategy for reading the "secular" social as religious. To borrow a phrase from Benjamin, what is presented below is only a "sketchy indication" of possible directions for further research, rather than a thorough analysis. The following is not an attempt to establish that the social remains religious, but is an exploration of what emerges from an analysis that takes this position as its starting point. Since this is only a sketch, the concepts relied upon are necessarily somewhat inexact. In *One-Way Street*, Benjamin provides a metaphor about reading that, *mutatis mutandis*, can also serve as a metaphor for the change in perspective adopted in this presentation:

> The power of a country road when one is walking along it is different from the power it has when one is flying over it by airplane. In the same way, the power of a text when it is read is different from the power it has when it is copied out. The airplane passenger sees only how the road pushes through the landscape, how it unfolds according to the same laws as the terrain surrounding it. Only he who walks the road on foot learns of the power it commands, and of how, from the very scenery that for the flier is only the unfurled plain, it calls forth distances, belvederes, clearings, prospects at each of its turns like a commander deploying solders at a front. (SW1, 447-48; GS4, 90)[464]

---

[464] "*Die Kraft der Landstraße ist eine andere, ob einer sie geht oder im Aeroplan darüber hinfliegt. So ist auch die Kraft eines Textes eine andere, ob einer ihn liest oder*

Up to now, we have been walking through Benjamin's texts, inspecting the details. Now I propose to take flight, and examine the distant intellectual terrain that stretches out before us. By examining this vista from "on high," as it were, our concepts are no longer precise, but incorporate great swaths of content that would need to be differentiated in a more rigorous analysis.

The various ways that the "secular" social remains related to the religious have been noted by many theorists besides Benjamin. One line of inquiry is represented by Schmitt and Agamben, who construct genealogies that locate the origin of modern western political concepts in Christian theologies. A different historical argument is proffered by Weber, who, as we have seen, claims that the "spirit" of modern Capital shares deep affinities with the "spirit" of earlier European protestant "sects." Another trajectory is pursued by Durkheim and the neo-Durkheimians. Employing a functionalist paradigm, they maintain that contemporary western "secular" institutions evince important correspondences with the underlying purpose served by religion. As described in Chapter One, their arguments amount to claiming that religion has not vacated the public sphere. Lefort opens a further line of inquiry, one which seems to combine both the historical and the sociological, arguing that the political, even the "secular," should really be thought of in terms of the "theological-political." Sorel, whom many see as

---

abschreibt. Wer fliegt, sieht nur, wie sich die Straße durch die Landschaft schiebt, ihm rollt sie nach den gleichen Gesetzen ab wie das Terrain, das herum liegt. Nur wer die Straße geht, erfährt von ihrer Herrschaft und wie aus eben jenem Gelände, das für den Flieger nur die aufgerollte Ebene ist, sie Fernen, Belvederes, Lichtungen, Prospekte mit jeder ihrer Wendungen so herauskommandiert, wie der Ruf des Befehlshabers Soldaten aus seiner Front."

having had a significant influence on Benjamin's ideas, suggests a more strategic use of the religious, lobbying for the creation of a political "myth" of the left.[465] All these research agendas are united in their rejection of what I have termed the strong version of the secularization-thesis, and, in what follows, I assume, for the sake of argument, that these theories are proven.

Here, I aim to move beyond simply reaffirming that the religious remains constitutive of the social. Instead, I mean to take a cue from essays such as Benjamin's radio addresses and de-emphasize the positivist moment in the description of the social. Specifically, I propose we utilize religious concepts to highlight the religious dimension of the social, specifically, the political. The reading being suggested here is subversive. It is to read a text against itself in the manner Benjamin suggested brushing history against the grain. Indeed, Rawls notes that Durkheim employed this strategy with respect to the European philosophical tradition: instead of reading philosophers as philosophers, Durkheim approached philosophy as modern folklore. Similarly, I propose to re-imagine the "secular" political as a theocracy. The fact that the "secular" political does not, *prima facie*, present itself as a theocracy is irrelevant for our purpose.

The attempt to re-image the political as a theocracy will be indicated by noting the continued influence of the pagan concept of sacrifice in contemporary neo-liberal

---

[465] See, Boer, "The Perpetual Allure of the Bible for Marxism," for a review of some key figures in the Marxian tradition attempting to merge theology and critical theory. Also see, John Roberts "The 'Returns to Religion': Messianism, Christianity and the Revolutionary Tradition. Part I: 'Wakefulness to the Future,'" *Historical Materialism* 16 (2008): 59-84; John Roberts, "The 'Returns to Religion': Messianism, Christianity and the Revolutionary Tradition. Part II: The Pauline Tradition," *Historical Materialism* 16 (2008): 77-103.

political discourses.[466] My claim is that contemporary western democratic discourses rely on a religious logic for their rhetorical force. The point is not simply the fact that these discourses are steeped in religious concepts. Rather, I suggest that these concepts remain socially powerful because they are derived from a religious relation to the real; or, in Benjamin's idiom, a mythic relation. It is this relation, more than the discourse itself that is at issue in the present analysis. These discourses "tap into" or "speak to" a religious imaginary that persists in the contemporary "secular" social. I claim that if we metaschematize along Benjaminian and Hammanian lines, we can submit that the mythic imaginary is found in the fact that secular democratic parties are subjectively experienced as fulfilling the same general role that ancient pagan priests did with respect to their cult.

Let us review the principal strand of the argument that the modern social can be read religiously. Benjamin suggests that Capital can be thought of as a religion. According to him, if Capital is a religion, it is a mythic one, characterized by a circular temporality, psychic bondage, and gods that determine the fate of humanity. Support for Benjamin's theory can be found in Marx, Durkheim, and to a lesser extent in Weber. Marx noted that the alienation, characteristic of Capital, results in labour being perceived as an objective natural force, instead of being recognized as one generated by human beings. However, upon closer examination, the notion of "natural" as it appears in contemporary political discourses is not equivalent to the notion of nature in Newtonian

---

[466] See, Frank Pearce, "Obligatory Sacrifice and Imperial Projects," in *State Crime in the Global Age*, ed. William J. Chambliss, Raymond Michalowski and Ronald C. Kramer (Cullompton: Willan Publishing, 2010). I am indebted to Pearce for the insight regarding the overlap between the concept of sacrifice in pagan religions and contemporary political discourses.

physics. Instead, it edges nearer to the understanding of nature that could be posited in a non-scientific "religious" imaginary. Whereas natural laws, in a Newtonian sense, are descriptions of immutable physical processes, the "natural laws" of the social seem amenable to the petitions of human beings.

The historical analyses of Weber, Schmitt, Agamben and others, not fully explored in the previous chapters, indicate that the concrete manifestation of the religious is to some extent determined by the social text from which the phenomenon arises. That is, with their insights, we move from Durkheim's highly abstract and generalized determination of the religious, to a more concrete level, to the socio-historical incarnation of the religion of Capital in contemporary western neo-liberal societies. Weber's examination of the spirit of Capital indicates that the putatively secular imaginaries, which eventually emerged in European modernity, were couched in the worldviews of Protestant theologies. The new does not spring forth, fully formed, and armed, like Athena from the head of Zeus, but is interwoven with the social text from which it originates. That is to say, as Capital re-shaped Europe's religious imaginary, the ideational framework remained essentially Christo-pagan. The religion of Capital is European, perhaps the first genuine world religion to have emerged from that region. It draws its content from both biblical and pagan sources. Durkheim noted that when cultures attain a sufficient degree of internal differentiation, natural and social forces in the collective imaginary become represented by anthropomorphized gods. If we accept that Weber and the other architects of politico-religious genealogies showed that the new

remains bound to the old, perhaps we can bestow the biblical name Mammon on the dominant "objective" force in modernity: Mammon the god of Capital.

From our previous analysis, we recall Durkheim's insight that gods tend to be worshipped indirectly, through an intermediary object: the fetish. Rawls seems to echo aspects of Benjamin's thesis by combining elements of Durkheim's and Weber's theories, noting that perhaps the history of European modernity resulted in elevating money, or better, "value" to the level of a contemporary fetish. Value is the abstract force represented by the fetish, which is the social representation of a supernatural power. Value is the highest metaphysical instant in capitalist culture. The metaphysical power of value is demonstrated in its seemingly magical ability to transubstantiate everything into a manifestation of itself. The form of value is formless. Value, like Zeus, can assume any guise it desires.

Since the market, an expression of Mammon, is not directly under human control, but does appear susceptible to humanity's wishes, sacrifices are made to lobby the god. A sacrifice can be defined as:

> [A]n act or acts by which a sacrificer gives up something it values to a superior sacred other, sometimes through a ritual officiated by a sacrificer, in the hope of creating for itself and sometimes for designated others a right relation with the superior other and possibly to receive other benefits that the latter can bestow.[467]

The sacrifices to Mammon are in kind. The god of value is offered value so as to ensure the production of value. As Durkheim noted, this is the essential logic of all

---

[467] Pearce, "Obligatory Sacrifice and Imperial Projects," 49.

sacrifice. The totemic god is provided with an instance of the totem in order to ensure the continuation of the community. Food is offered so as to ensure the production of more food in the future. To translate this back into the "secular" discourse of political economy, the market requires the correct social conditions to flourish. If a community is to become rich, it must, according to the formula of value for value, sacrifice one form of wealth to receive another. Sacrifice is contractual. Something is offered so that something else is received. If something of great value is needed, some equivalent object must be found for sacrifice. Often the value of the sacrificial object can be determined by the degree of privation suffered by the community when the object is lost. The more the community requires the sacrificial object for its survival, the more valuable it is deemed to be.

Historically, most cults, especially in a social that is internally differentiated, have priests who are charged with reading the signs and officiating the sacrifices intended to placate or lobby the gods. The language of the gods is ambiguous and competing interpretations of the signs are always possible. This fact accounts for the existence of competing priestly classes.[468] The mood of the gods is thought to be discernible in the operations of the social and natural domain. Order will not prevail, if the gods are angry. We recall, for example, that Thebes was beset by plague because of "religious pollution," and that the calamities which putatively befell ancient Egypt were the result of having enslaved God's chosen people. If an injustice has been committed, because a taboo has

[468] Cf. Tausig, "History as Sourcery." Here Taussig's suggestion becomes that social scientists have a function analogous to sooth-sayers and augers of the ancient world, whose basic concern was to interpret correctly what the gods wanted.

been broken, rituals, often including sacrifices, must be carried out to re-establish order. It is incumbent upon the moral community to remain in a positive relationship with the gods, and if this relationship is disrupted, to repair it as soon as possible.

I claim that this description of sacrifice as a central category for re-establishing a lost cosmic order, for creating beneficial conditions for the community, remains operative in neo-liberal political discourse. We can see that, in some respects, political parties in western democracies have taken over the role formerly executed by pagan priests with respect to reading the signs and officiating the sacrifices. Support for this admittedly unusual assertion can be found in Schmitt's political theology. Schmitt famously asserted that, "Sovereign is he who decides on the exception."[469] That is, the sovereign occupies a liminal position with respect to law. This border-position is homologous to that of the biblical God with respect to creation. I maintain that it is possible to generalize Schmitt's claim beyond the European theological context. The association of political power with the sacred is perhaps the underlying logic of most, if not all, political power. If Schmitt's decisionist formula allows us to determine the place of power, I submit that simultaneously it allows us to localize the place of the sacred.

In representative democracies it is "the people" who are sovereign, at least theoretically. "The people," do not, however, govern directly, but their will is meant to be executed by political parties speaking on their behalf. In these democracies, it is the ruling party, especially its symbolic figurehead, which assumes the status of the sovereign. Therefore, it is the party and its leader which approach the sacred centre of the

---

[469] Schmitt, *Political-Theology*, 5.

social. They occupy the liminal position homologous to that of the god-head. Notwithstanding the existence of various fringe parties that sometimes garner a few percentages of the popular vote, most contemporary European and North American countries are defined by two main interpretations of the market, or two essential interpretations of Mammon's signs. That is, there exist two main priestly classes, which can call for the state of exception. The ruling party can, on behalf of "the people," create a situation in which normal operations are suspended for the good of the political system as a whole. The sovereign is both "inside" and "outside" the law because he is at once able to suspend it, and, in that very act, confirms it. We recall from our previous discussion that for Schmitt the exception establishes the rule. I suggest, then, that the sacrificial moment can be seen as one embodiment of the state of exception. The sacrifice is a sacred event, called for when exceptional circumstances have arisen.

What happens if a sacrifice has been made and the desired result is not attained? Durkheim tells us that in such an event the ritual is not discarded as ineffective: the structure of belief is resistant to empirical evidence suggesting a contrary interpretation of the facts. This is because the underlying purpose of the religious is to bind the community together, and the symbolic system is merely a retrospective justification of this primary function. Discarding a culture's entire symbolic system is generally deemed far too radical a solution to a problem that can be accounted for within the symbolic system. That is, if a desired result is not attained through sacrifice, the fault is usually found with the sacrifice, the sacrificee, or the sacrificer, and not with the symbolic system that calls for the sacrifice in the first place.

As defined above, a sacrifice always entails privation. When food is scarce, it is often food that is sacrificed. If rain is wanting then water may well be the offering. Human sacrifice is the paradigmatic example of a loss to the community. In contemporary discourses, public education, public sector salaries, health care benefits, and taxes on big companies are offered on the sacrificial altar, in the hopes that the god will show his favor. How far can this logic be taken, however, before the community itself is destroyed? Again, according to Durkheim the religious exists because it provides the necessary centrifugal force that keeps a community together, and this force is exerted through ritual. What if, by way of example, water is scarce, the community sacrifices something of value, perhaps water, in the hopes of getting rain, but rain does not come? How much more can be sacrificed? We recall from Levi-Strauss' work that there need not be doctrinal agreement for a community to be considered a unity. What is essential is that all members of the community participate in the cult. Consensus regarding what the god's signs mean is not necessary. In contemporary western politics we have, to use the language of Zizek, a "reactionary-conservative" reading of the intentions of Mammon, as well as a "progressivist-liberal" reading.

The reactionary-conservative priestly faction, more recently labeled "market fundamentalists," tend to argue that worsening economic forecasts can only be countered by greater sacrifices of value. The objective historical conditions, for example that the economy is worsening, are signs that Mammon is not pleased. The problem, according to this group, is that the sacrifices so far have not been thorough enough. Some of the sacrificial offerings have been put aside for the use by the community, instead of being

offered to Mammon, and this, they claim, is the reason he did not send what is needed. The progressive-liberal priestly group counters the argument that while sacrifices to Mammon are necessary, all obligatory sacrifices have already been made. What remains should be retained by the existing community for its maintenance, so that in the future, it can make additional sacrifices. This group tends to argue that the signs have been misread, and that there are indications that Mammon is already placated.

Both priestly classes share the assumption that Mammon can only be satisfied through sacrifice, differing only regarding the extent of the sacrifice. If we again metaschematize, we may agree with Benjamin that there is indeed another group occupying a position in contemporary politics similar to that of the early Roman Christians of the common era before Constantine. These radicals, like the early Christians, tend to come from subaltern social classes. They are generally ignored by the official priestly discourses, if not mocked or persecuted. The problem faced by this third group, both in the late Roman imperium and in contemporary politics, is that their discourse exists beyond the horizon of the official cult. Their doctrinal position is to end all sacrifices, smash the idols and create a theological relationship to the only true God.

If "reactionaries" and "progressives" represent the two official priestly classes, the third, subaltern group, is composed of Anarchists and Marxists. According to them, Mammon is not a god, but a human creation, an idol. Relating to this idol as if it exists independently of human actions and making sacrifices to it in order to extract a reciprocal response simply means condemning humanity to ever more severe cycles of bondage. In Benjamin's idiom, this approach to the social generates mythic temporality. Unlike the

pagan god Mammon, the biblical God is not a god with attributes. It represents the infinity of the human essence. The logic of the biblical taboo on making graven images gestures towards this infinity. In Lefort's language, the symbolic centre of a true democracy remains empty. In this vision of the social, gods effectively vacate the ideational landscape.

The logic that dominates the conservative-reactionary position is repeated to a lesser degree in the progressivist-liberal one, namely that sacrifice is the only solution to the problem of human suffering. No matter what the objective historical conditions, sacrifices of value are the only options for a community devoted to Mammon. According to Durkheim, the essential moment of the ritual is that it generates a sense of community. It does not placate a god who has an ontological existence independent from the community. In this sense, the priestly heretics could be understood as calling for the end of false sacrifices, because these are not necessary for sustaining the community. The community can only survive by focusing on rituals that establish the community, not ones that endanger the community through excessive privation. In a sense, then, the heretics are calling for an Enlightenment-awakening from the bondages of superstition. As Benjamin argues, as long as agency is felt to reside outside the community, in a god, there can be no freedom. Only when this god is recognized as the infinity at the centre of humanity, is humanity in a position to create a social based in freedom.

The association of Marxists and Anarchists with Christians of the pre-Constantine empire highlights a sublime lexical irony. The Roman pagans first applied the term atheist to Christians. Following the logic just sketched, there is a certain coherence to this

charge, since these Christian "atheists" did not accept the existence of pagan gods, while their biblical God could not be represented. It is as if he does not exist. In this sense the "atheism" of the Marxists and Anarchists, can be read as the fulfillment of biblical logic, of taking the Judeo-Christian message to its ultimate and necessary conclusion. As Benjamin seems to imply, only Marxists and Anarchists are the really religious, while the putatively "secular" priests are simply pagan heretics, mistaken in their religious views. In Benjamin's work, Marxism is not the rejection of Christianity and the biblical tradition, but its fulfillment. Put differently, theology is the animating "spirit" of Marxism. It is the dwarf pulling the strings of an essentially inanimate political casing.

With this brief description of the logic of pagan sacrifice in contemporary political discourse, we discover just one dimension of the social that secular theory denies and suppresses. We can read "backwards" from the narratives of contemporary politics to the *Ur*-phenomenon that underlies them.

If Benjamin represents a problem for contemporary atheist Marxian readers because he blatantly includes religious language in his analysis of the social, I maintain that his work can be read simultaneously as the solution to the very problem his philosophy seems to pose.

Bibliography

Adorno, Theodor W. "Essay as Form." In Vol. 1, *Notes to Literature*. Edited by Rolf Tiedemann. Translated by Shierry Nicholsen, 3-23. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.

---. "Introduction to Benjamin's *Schriften*." In *On Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Recollection*. Edited by Gary Smith. Translated by R. Hullot-Kentor, 2-17. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1988.

---. *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*. Translated by E. F. N. Jephcott. London: Verso, 2005.

---. *Negative Dialectics*. Translated by E. B. Ashton. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2005.

---. "Subject and Object." In *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*. Edited by Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt. New York: The Continuum Publishing Group, 2005.

Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Edited by Werner Hamacher and David E. Wellbery. Translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998.

---. "The Idea of Language." In *Potentialities*. Translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen, 39-47. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999.

---. *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*. Translated by Lorenzo Chiesa. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011.

---. *State of Exception*. Translated by Kevin Attell. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

Albritton, Robert. "Theorizing Capital's Deep Structre and the Transformation of Capitalism." *Historical Materialism* 12, no. 3 (2004): 53-72.

Althusser, Louis. *Lenin and Philosophy: And other Essays*. Translated by Ben Brewster. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001.

---. *On Ideology*. London: Verso, 2008.

Anderson, Perry. *Considerations on Western Marxism*. London: New Left Review, 1976.

Arthur, Christopher J. "The Hegel-Marx Connection." *Historical Materialism* 2, no. 1 (2003): 179-183.

Augustine. *Confessions*. Translated by R. S. Pine-Coffin. London: Penguin Books, 1961.

---. "Of True Religion." In *Earlier Writings*. Edited by John H. S. Burleigh, 225- 283. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1953.

Badiou, Alain. *Saint Paul: The Foundations of Universalism*. Translated by Ray Brassier. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003.

Bakunin, Mikhail Aleksandrovich. *God and the State*. New York: Mother Earth Publications, 1880.

Balfour, Ian. "Reversal, Quotation (Benjamin's History)." German Issue, *MLN* 106, no. 3 (April 1991): 622-647.

Beiner, Ronald. "Walter Benjamin's Philosophy of History." *Political Theory* 12, no. 3 (August 1984): 423-434.

Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*. Edited by Rolf Tiedemann. Translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 2002.

---. *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910-1940*. Edited by Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno. Translated by Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

---. *Early Writings 1910-1917*. Translated by Howard Eiland with others. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 2011.

---. *Gesammelte Schriften*. Edited by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser with the assistance of Theodor W. Adorno and Gerschom Scholem. 7 vols. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1991.

---. *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. Edited by Hannah Arendt. Translated by Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1968.

---. *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Translated by John Osborn. London: Verso, 1998.

---. *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*. Edited by Peter Demetz. Tranlsated by Edmund Jephcott. New York: Schocken Books, 1978.

---. *Selected Writings*. Edited by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings. 4 vols. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 1996.

Bergson, Henri. *Matter and Memory*. Translated by N. M. Paul and W. S. Palmer. New York: Zone Books, 1991.

Bernstein, J. M. *The Berstein Tapes: Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, audio recordings of graduate lectures by J. M. Berstein delivered at the New School for Social Research, New York, Fall and Winter semesters 2006. http://www.bernsteintapes.com/

Boer, Roland. "The Full Story: On Marxism and Religion." *International Socialism* 123, (Summer 2009). http://www.isj.org.uk/index.php4?s=contents&issue=123

---. "The Perpetual Allure of the Bible for Marxism." *Historical Materialism* 15 (2007): 53-77.

Bredekamp, Horst. "From Walter Benjamin to Carl Schmitt, via Thomas Hobbes." *Critical Inquiry* 25, no. 2 (Winter 1999): 247-266.

Brier, Peter. "Walter Benjamin: Sparks of Holiness." *Southwest Review* 88, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 79-92.

Brisson, Luc. *Plato the Myth Maker*. Edited by and translated by Gerard Naddaf. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

Breton André. *Nadja*. Tranlsated by Richard Howard. New York: Grove Press, 1960.

Bröcker, Michael. *Die Grundlosigkeit der Wahrheit: Zum Verhältnis von Sprache, Geschichte und Theologie bei Walter Benjamin.* Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 1993.

---. "Sprache." In Vol. 2, *Benjamins Begriffe*. Edited by Michael Opitz and Erdmut Wizisla, 740-773. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2000.

Buck-Morss, Susan. *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project.* Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991.

Cassirer, Ernst. *Language and Myth.* Translated by Susanne K. Langer. New York: Dover Publications, 1946.

Caygill, Howard. "Benjamin, Heidegger and the Destruction of Tradition." In *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience.* Edited by Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne, 1-30. Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2000.

---. *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience.* New York: Routledge, 1998.

Chadwick, Owen. *The Secularization of the European Mind in the 19th Century.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975.

Chaplin, Charles. *Modern Times.* DVD. Directed by Charles Chaplin. Charles Chaplin Productions, 1936.

Clark, T. J. "Should Benjamin Have Read Marx?" *boundary 2* 30, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 31-49.

Cohen, Hermann. *Logik der Reinen Erkenntnis.* Berlin: Bruno Cassirer Verlag, 1922.

Cowen, Bainard. "Walter Benjamin's Theory of Allegory." Special Issue on Modernism, *New German Critique*, no. 22 (Winter 1981): 109-122.

De Man, Paul. "'Conclusions' on Walter Benjamin's 'The Task of the Translator' Messenger Lecture, Cornell University, March 4, 1983." *Yale French Studies* 69 (1985): 25-46.

De Vries, Hent and Lawrence E. Sullivan, eds. *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-secular World.* New York: Fordham University Press, 2006.

Durkheim, Émile. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life.* Translated by Joseph Ward Swain. New York: Free Press, 1965.

---. *The Rules of Sociological Method.* Edited by Steven Lukes. Tranlsated by W. D. Halls. London: The MacMillian Press, 1982.

Eagleton, Terry. *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009.

Ehrman, Bart D. *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Feuerbach, Ludwig. *Das Wesen des Christentums.* Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1973.

Fichte, Johann Gottlieb. *Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation.* Translated by Garrett Green. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978.

Fiorato, Pierfrancesco. "Die Erfahrung, das Unbedingte und die Religion: Walter Benjamin als Leser von *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*." In *Herman Cohen's Philosophy of Religion: International Conference in Jerusalem 1996.* Edited by Stéphane Moses and Hartwig Wiedebach, 71-84. Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1997.

Gansel, Dennis and Peter Thorwarth. *Die Welle*. DVD. Directed by Dennis Gansel. Berlin: Rat Pack Film Productions GmbH, 2008.

Gauchet, Marcel. *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion.* Translated by Oscar Burge. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997.

Gibbs, Robert. "The Limits of Thought: Rosenzweig, Schelling, and Cohen." *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung* 43, no. 4 (Oct.-Dec., 1989): 618- 640.

Ginzburg, Carlo. *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*. Translated by John Tedeschi and Anne Tedeschi. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976.

Goethe, Johann Wolfgang. *Elective Affinities*. Translated by David Constantine. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.

Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. New York: International Publishers, 1971.

Habermas, Jürgen. "Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique." In *On Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Recollections.* Edited by Gary Smith. Cambridge, 90-128. MA: The MIT Press, 1988.

---. *Structural Transformations of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Translated by Thomas Burger with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1989.

Halbwachs, Maurice. *Sources of Religious Sentiment.* Translated by John A. Spaulding. New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1962.

Hamacher, Werner. "Guilt History: Benjamin's Sketch 'Capitalism as Religion.'" Ethics, *Diacritics* 32, no. ¾ (Autumn – Winter 2002): 81-106.

Hamann, Johann Gerog. *Writings on Philosophy and Language*. Edited and translated by Kenneth Haynes. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Hanssen, Beatrice. "Philosophy at its Origin: Walter Benjamin's Prologue to the *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*." *MLN* 110, no. 4 (september 1995): 809-833.

Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion: The Lectures of 1827*. Edited by Peter C. Hodgson. Translated by R F. Brown, P. C. Hodgson and J. M. Stewart. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.

---. *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Translated by A. V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.

Hillach, Ansgar. "Dialektisches Bild." In Vol. 1, *Benjamins Begriffe*. Edited by Michael Opitz and Erdmut Wizisla, 186-229. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2000.

Holz, Hans Heinz. "Idee." In Vol. 2, *Benjamins Begriffe*. Edited by Michael Opitz and Erdmut Wizisla, 445-478. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2000.

Holzhey, Helmut. "Platon im Neukantianismus." In *Platon in der abenländischen Geistesgeschichte: Neue Forschungen zum Platonismus*. Edited by Theo Kobusch and Burkhard Mojsisch. Darmstadt, Germany: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschart, 1997.

Horkheimer, Max. *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*. Translated by J. O'Connel and others. New York: Continuum, 2002.

---. *Eclips of Reason*. London: Contiuum, 1947.

Horkheimer, Max and Theodor W. Adorno. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Edited by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr. Translated by Edmund Jepchott. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987.

Horowitz, Asher. *Ethics at a Standstill: History and Subjectivity in Levinas and the Frankfurt School*. Pittsburgh: Dunquest University Press, 2008.

Jacobson, Eric. *Metaphysics of the Profane: The Political Theology of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem*. New York: Columbia University, 2003.

Jameson, Fredric. "Baleful Enchantments of the Concept." In *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, the Persistence of the Dialectic*, 49-58. London: Verso, 2007.

Jay, Martin. *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973.

Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Translated by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

---. *Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics That Will be Able to Come Forward as Science with Selections from the Critique of Pure Reason*. Edited and translated by Garry Hatfield. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

---. *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason and other Writings*. Edited and translated by Allen Wood and George Di Giovanni. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Kaulen, Heinrich. "Rettung." In Vol. 2, *Benjamins Begriffe*. Edited by Michael Opitz and Erdmut Wizisla, 619-664. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2000.

Kierkegaard, Søren. *Fear and Trembling and Repetition*. Edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna V. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983.

Koepnick, Lutz P. "The Spectacle, the Trauerspiel, and the Politics of Resolution: Benjamin Reading the Baroque Reading Weimar." *Critical Inquiry* 22, no. 2 (1996): 268-91.

Kohlenbach, Margarete. *Walter Benjamin: Self-reference and Religiosity*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.

Köhnke, Klaus Christian. *The Rise of Neo-Kantianism*. Translated by R. J. Hollingdale. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

Korsch, Karl. *Marxism and Philosophy*. Tranlsated by Fred Halliday. New York: Monthly Review, 1970.

Kramer, Amadeus. "Genesis des Bildes." In *Antike und Moderne: Zu Walter Benjamins "Passagen."* Edited by Nobert W. Bolz and Richard Faber. Würzburg: Könighausen und Neumann, 1986.

Lefort, Claude. "Permanence of the Political-Theological?" In *Democracy and Political Theory*. Translated by David Macey, 213-255. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988.

Lembeck, Karl-Heinz. *Platon in Marburg: Platonrezeption und Philosophiegeschichtsphilosophie bei Cohen und Natorp*. Würzburg: Könighausen und Neumann, 1994.

Leibniz, G. W. *Discours on Metaphysics and other Essays*. Translated by Daniel Graber and Roger Ariew. Cambridge, MA: Hackett Publishing, 1991.

Lévinas, Emmanuel. *Otherwise than Being: Or, Beyond Essence*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *Structural Anthropology*. Translated by Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf. 2 vols. New York: Basic Books, 1963.

Löwy, Michael. "Capitalism as Religion: Walter Benjamin and Max Weber." *Science and Society* 17 (2009): 60-73.

---. "Figures of Weberian Marxism." *Theory and Society* 25, no. 3 (June 1996): 431-446.

---. "Friedrich Engles on Religion and Class Struggle." *Science and Society* 62, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 79-87.

---. *Redemption and Utopia: Jewish Libertarian Thought in Central Europe: A Study in Elective Affinity*. Translated by Hope Heaney. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988.

---. "Weber Against Marx? The Polemic with Historical Materialism in the Protestant Ethic." *Science and Society* 53, no. 1 (Spring 1989): 71-83.

Löwy, Michael, Gerschom Scholem and Michael Richardson. "Messianism in the Early Works of Gerschom Scholem." Special Issue on Walter Benjamin, *New German Critique*, no 83 (Spring – Summer 2001): 171-191.

Lukacher, Ned. "Walter Benjamin's Chthonian Revolution." Engagments: Potmodernism, Marxism Politics, *boundary 2* 11, no ½ (Autumn – Winter 1982-1983): 41-57.

Lukács, Georg. *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*. Tranlsated by Rodney Livingstone. London: Merlin Press, 1968.

---. "On Walter Benjamin." *New Left Review* I, no. 110 (July-August 1978): 83-88.

Marcuse, Herbert. *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1941.

Marx, Karl. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Translated by Ben Fowkes. 3 vols. London: Penguin Books in association with New Left Review, 1990.

---. *Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right.'* Edited by Joseph O'Malley. Translated by Annette Jolin and Joseph O'Malley. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970.

---. *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. Edited by Martin Milligan. Translated by Martin Milligan. New York: Dover Publications, 2007.

---. *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*. Translated by Martin Nicolaus. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1973.

---. "Theses on Feuerbach." In *The German Ideology*. New York: Prometheus Books, 1998.

Marx, Karl and Friedrich Engles. *The German Ideology*. New York: Prometheus Books, 1998.

McLeod, Hugh. *Secularization in Western Europe, 1848-1914*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000.

Mendieta, Eduardo, ed. *The Frankfurt School on Religion: Key Writings by the Major Thinkers*. New York: Routledge, 2005.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Adventures of the Dialectic*. Translated by Joseph Bien. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973.

Milbank, John. *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. 2nd ed. Blackwell Publishing, 2006.

Missac, Pierre. "Walter Benjamin: From Rupture to Shipwreck." In *On Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Recollection.* Edited by Gary Smith. Translated by Victoria Bridges, Larry Cohen, Kevin McLaughlin, and Gary Smith, 210-223. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1988.

Mittelstrass, Jürgen. *Die Rettung der Phänomene: Ursprung und Geschichte eines antiken Forschungsprinzips*. Berlin: Walter De Gruyter and Co., 1962.

Molyneux, John. "More than Opium: Marxism and Religion." *International Socialism* 119 (Summer 2008). http://www.isj.org.uk/index.php4?s=contents&issue=119

Moran, Dermot. *Introduction to Phenomenology*. London: Routledge, 2000.

Natorp, Paul. *Platons Ideenlehre: Eine einführung in den Idealismus*. 2nd ed. Leipzig: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1921.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Birth of Tragedy*. Edited by Raymond Geuss and Ronald Spiers. Translated by Ronald Spiers. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

---. *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale. New York: Vintage Books, 1989.

Origen. "On First Principles." In *Origen*, 171-216. Translated by Rowan A. Greer. New York: Paulist Press, 1979.

Pearce, Frank. "Obligatory Sacrifice and Imperial Projects." In *State Crime in the Global Age*, 44-66. Edited by William J. Chambliss, Raymond Michalowski and Ronald C. Kramer, 45-66. Cullompton: Willan Publishing, 2010.

Pickering, W. S. F. "The Sacred and the Profane: The Grounds of Religion." Chap. 7 in *Durkheim's Sociology of Religion: Themes and Theories*. Cambridge: James Clarke and Company, 1984.

Plate, Brent S. *Walter Benjamin, Religion, and Aesthetics: Rethinking Religion Through the Arts*. New York: Routledge, 2005.

Plato. "Meno." In *Five Dialogues: Eythypohro, Apology, Crito, Meno, Phedo*, 58-92. 2nd ed. Translated by G. M. A. Grube. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2002.

---. *Parmenides*. Translated by Mary Louise Gill and Paul Rayn. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1996.

---. *The Republic*. Translated by Robin Waterfield. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.

---. *The Symposium*. Translated by Christopher Gill. New York: Penguine Books, 1999.

---. *Timaeus*. Edited by Oskar Piest. Translated by Francis M. Cornford. New York: Macmillian Publishing Company, 1959.

Poma, Andrea. *The Critical Philosophy of Hermann Cohen*. Translated by John Denton. New York: State University of New York Press, 1997.

Postone, Moishe. *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rawls, Anne Warfield. *Epistemology and Practice: Durkheim's The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Remes, Pauliina. *Neoplatonism*. Berkley: University of California Press, 2008.

Roberts, John. "The 'Returns to Religion': Messianism, Christianity and tge Revolutionary Tradition. Part I: 'Wakefulness to the Future.'" *Historical Materialism* 16 (2008): 59-84.

---. "The 'Returns to Religion': Messianism, Christianity and the Revolutionary Tradition. Part II: The Pauline Tradition." *Historical Materialism* 16 (2008): 77-103.

Rochlitz, Rainer. *The Disenchantment of Art: The Philosophy of Walter Benjamin*. Translated by Jane Marie Todd. New York: Guilford Press, 1996.

Rosen, Charles. "The Ruins of Walter Benjamin." In *On Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Recollection*. Edited by Gary Smith, 129-174. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1988.

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *A Discourse on Inequality*. Translated by Maurice Cranston. London: Penguin Books, 1984.

Schmitt, Carl. *The Concept of the Political*. Translated by George Schwab. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996.

---. *Political-Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*. Tranlsated by George Schwab. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985.

Scholem, Gershom. *Walter Benjamin: Die Geschichte einer Freundschaft*. 4th ed. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1997.

---. "Toward and Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism." In *Messianic Idea in Judaism: And other Essays*, 1-36. New York: Schocken Books, 1971.

---. "The Messianic Idea in Kabbalism." In *Messianic Idea in Judaism: And other Essays*, 37-48. New York: Schocken Books, 1971.

Schlegel, Frederick. *The Æsthetic and Miscellaneous Works of Frederick Von Schlegel*. Translated by E. J. Millington. London: Bibliobazaar, 1949.

Sorel, Georges. *The Illusions of Progress*. Translated by John Stanley and Charlotte Stanley. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969.

---. *Reflections on Violence*. Translated by T. E. Hulme and J. Roth. New York: Collier Books, 1950.

Speth, Rudolf. *Wahrheit und Ästhetik: Untersuchungen zum Frühwerk Walter Benjamins*. Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 1991.

Steiner, Uwe, and Colin Sample. "The True Politician: Walter Benjamin's Concept of the Political." Special Issue on Walter Benjamin, *New German Critique*, no. 83 (Spring-Summer 2001): 43-88.

Stern, David. "Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetics of Redemption." *The New Republic* 212, no. 13 (April 1995): 118-131.
Szondi, Peter. "Walter Benjamin's City Portraits." In *On Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Recollection.* Edited by Gary Smith. Translated by Harvey Mendelson, 18-31. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1988.
Taussig, Michael. "History as Sorcery." *Representations* 7 (Summer 1984): 87-109.
Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 2007.
Tiedemann, Rolf. "Dialectics at a Standtill: Approaches to the *Passagen-Werk.*" In *The Arcades Project*. Edited by Rolf Tiedemann. Translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, 929-945. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 2002.
---. *Studein zur Philosophie Walter Benjamins*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1973.
Tomba, Massimiliano. "Another kind of *Gewalt*: Beyond Law Re-Reading Walter Benjamin." *Historical Materialism* 17 (2009): 126-144.
Vlastos, Gregory. "Does Slavery Exist in Plato's *Republic*." In *Platonic Studies*, 140-146. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973.
Weber, Max. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism and other Writings.* Edited and translated by Gordon C. Wells. New York: Penguin Books, 2002
---. *The Sociology of Religion.* 4th ed. Tranlsated by Ephraim Fischoff. Boston: Beacon Press, 1991.
---. "Science as Vocation." In *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. Edited and Translated by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, 129-156. New York: Oxford University Press, 1946.
Weber, Samuel. *Benjamin's –abilities*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008.
---. "Taking Exception to Decision: Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt." *Diacritics* 22, no. 3/4 (Autumn - Winter 1992): 5-18.
Weber, Thomas. "Erfahrung." In Vol. 1, *Benjamins Begriffe*. Edited by Michael Opitz and Erdmut Wizisla, 230-259. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2000.
Weidner, Daniel ed. *Profanes Leben: Walter Benjamins Dialektik der Säkularisierung.* Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2010.
Weigel, Sigrid. *Walter Benjamin: Die Kreatur, das Heilige, die Bilder*. Frankfurt, a. M.: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2008.
Whitehead, Alfred North. *Modes of Thought*. New York: The Free Press, 1968.
---. *Religion in the Making: Lowell Lectures 1926*. New York: Fordham University Press, 1996.
Wisenthal, Liselotte. *Zur Wissenschaftstheorie Walter Benjamins*. Frankfurt a. M.: Athenäum Verlag, 1973.
Wohlfarth, Irving. "Re-Fusing Theology. Some First Responses to Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project.*" *New German Critique* 39 (Autumn 1986): 3-24.
Wolin, Richard. "Benjamin's Materialist Theory of Experience." *Theory and Society* 11, no. 1 (Jan., 1982): 17-42.
---. *The Frankfurt School Revisited and other Political Essays on Politics and Society.* New York: Routledge, 2006.

---. "Walter Benjamin's Failed Messianism: One-Way Street." *The New Republic* 222 (January 2000): 33-42.

Zizek, Slavoj. *First as Tragedy then as Farce*. New York: 2006.

---. "The Matrix, or Two Sides of Perversion." *Philosophy Today* 43 (1999).

---. *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema*. Parts 1-3. DVD. Directed by Sophie Fiennes. United Kingdom: Mischief Films and Amoeba Film, 2006.

---. *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2003.

---. "Towards a Materialist Theology." *Angelaki* 12, no. 1 (2007).

---. *The Universal Exception: Selected Writings*. 2 vols. Edited by Rex Butler and Scott Stephens. London: Continuum, 2006.